

# Luke 23:26

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     The commentator, Leon Morris, speaks of the closing words of verse 20 as the most moving text in the whole of Scripture, the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

And it's difficult to disagree with this conclusion, though no doubt we could offer up alternatives. There are many in the Bible, but they are stirring words, heartwarming words.

The Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. This verse, the whole of verse 20, encapsulates what we might call the drama of salvation, of my salvation, of your salvation, and it encapsulates that drama in three acts. Or in any case, that's the manner in which we're going to be considering the verse this evening. And in looking at the verse, we're not going to follow the order of Paul's words, but rather identify in chronological sequence three acts in the drama of our salvation, in eternity, in history, and in our present reality and personal experience. Act one will allow us to give some thought to what we're calling the reality of God's love, the reality of God's love. Act two will take us to what we're calling the demonstration of God's love. And then act three, the experience of God's love, very particularly our experience of God's love. Your experience, my experience of God's love. So, the reality of God's love that takes us into eternity, the demonstration of God's love in time and space, in history, and then our experience of God's love. Let's begin with what we're calling act one, the reality of God's love. And I'm thinking of words there towards the end of the verse where Paul affirms concerning Jesus, the Son of God who loved me. The Son of God who loved me. This act that we want to speak about just for a moment of the drama, it can be located in eternity or its beginning. If we can speak of beginnings, it can be located in eternity. We'll explain why we say that in a moment. But just notice how Paul speaks here with a childlike tenderness and simplicity about the love of his Savior, the love of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. Everything flows and is grounded in this, flows from, and is grounded in this wonderful reality of God's love. Love is not just a pleasing character trait that we find in God among many other character traits, be they pleasing or otherwise in our very flawed estimation. It is much more central or essential than that. And we use that word essential in its literal sense. The shorter catechism, which many of us were brought up on and very helpfully, often captures eternal truth in a few well-chosen words. But I think in this matter we would be so bold and maybe foolish to say that it's less than helpful. I'm thinking of a question that we'll be familiar with or some of you will be familiar with right at the beginning. We tend to be familiar more with the questions at the beginning than at the end. If you'd experience anything like mine, you learn the first few and then things get a bit trickier. But question four in our shorter catechism is a very big question.

What is God? And the answer that the Westminster Divines provide for us is as follows. God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. Now that is all true. And yet, I ask the question, where is love? It's not there in the answer. It's difficult in the light of the biblical revelation of God, the weight of evidence, the weight material that the Bible provides us to conceive of an answer to the question, what is God that omits any reference to His love? Now, in fairness, God's love perhaps could be understood as being comprehended in His goodness. But that is also less than satisfactory. The Bible portrays love as being at the very core of God of God's being. We think, of course, of what John says in his first letter in chapter 4 and verse 8,

God is love. Given that this is so, we can't speak of love as having a beginning. Love is as eternal as the God who is love. And that eternal love of God was not in eternity devoid of the opportunity to show and express itself. God's love has found eternal expression in the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity. The Father has eternally loved the Son, and the Son has eternally loved the Father.

[ 6 : 00 ] And we could also make reference to the other relationships within the Trinity. And we could go on and wax lyrical, or at least try to, maybe fail to do so, concerning this great subject, the eternal love of God and its character and excellencies. But what has that got to do with you?

What has that got to do with me? Well, listen to what Paul says here at the close of this verse. The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. And take careful note of this truth. This love for me also knows no beginning. What does God say to his people in the Old Testament? In the prophet Jeremiah chapter 31 and verse 3, we have recorded what God said to his people, I have loved you with an everlasting love. What does Paul say of God's eternal love for his people, for you and me? As he writes to the believers in the church in Ephesus in chapter 1 at the very beginning of his letter from verse 3, we read, which has been freely given us in the one he loves. Before the creation of the world he chose us, before the creation of the world in love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons.

And so we can say, the Father loved me from all eternity. The Son of God loved me from all eternity. The triune God, the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have ever loved me, loved me now, and will ever love me. That is the testimony of those who have been brought to faith in Jesus Christ.

This is good news beyond compare and beyond measure. This is the reality of God's eternal love. What can we say of the quality of that love towards us? Is it perhaps of a different character? Perhaps a pale reflection of the love to be found within the Trinity? Were that the case, it would still be immeasurable? It would still be amazing love. But that is not the case. God's love for his people, for you and me, is in its character and quality equivalent to the love that binds together our triune God. Listen to Jesus as he prays his high priestly prayer recorded for us said in John's gospel in chapter 17 and from verse 24. Jesus says, Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Notice Jesus there speaks of the Father loving him before the creation of the world. Then Jesus goes on, Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me.

[ 9 : 46 ] I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. Notice Jesus there goes on to speak of the Father's love for us, for his people, and he equates it to the love of the Father for Jesus. And what has he just said of that love? He's spoken of how the Father loved him before the creation of the world, and he says it's that same love that you bear for your people. This is the reality of God's eternal love. This is the foundation and motivation for all that follows in God's work of creation and providence and supremely his work of salvation. God is love. God is love. And everything God does reflects and reveals who he is.

And this is our personal reality as God's children. With Paul, we can say, He loved me. The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Can you say that? Is that your testimony? Is that your story? Can you speak of this love in that way? The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Well, let's move on to what we're calling Act 2, the demonstration of God's love. God is love, and yet this love of God has found expression in history. God has demonstrated His love in time and space in history, and He has done so supremely in the giving of His Son to die for us.

Paul uses that very language of God demonstrating His love when he writes to the Romans or the church in Rome. In chapter 5 and verse 8, we read, God demonstrates His love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. His love for us is an eternal constant, but there's a demonstration of it at a particular moment and point in history. God demonstrates His own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And this is what the apostle is talking about in this verse when he speaks of the Son of God giving Himself for Paul. He loved me and gave Himself for me. Now, we've talked about God's eternal love for His people, taking the words of Paul as our starting point. He loved me. But in fairness, this whole expression,

He loved me and gave Himself for me, used by Paul, points very particularly to Calvary. When Paul says, He loved me, the tense that he employs suggests that Paul has in mind a particular occasion or act of love. And the words that follow, and gave Himself for me, very clearly serve as an explanation of that act or demonstration of love. The Son of God gave Himself for His people on the cross.

Even the language that Paul uses here, He gave Himself for me. It's priestly language, it's sacrificial language. The Son of God appointed our great high priest, gave Himself over to death as the perfect and sufficient sacrifice for our sin. This, of course, is what we will be remembering and celebrating as we participate in the Lord's Supper this evening. It's striking that one verse in the Bible that could be said to serve as a definition of love, hones in on this great act of priestly and sacrificial self-giving. Back to what John has to say in his first letter and in chapter 4 and verse 10, we read, this is love. Not that we love God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He loved me and gave Himself for me. Pause for a moment and think about particularly that very personal language that Paul employs. He's speaking of great theological truths, but he couches it in this very intimate, personal language of his own experience of God's love.

[ 14 : 50 ] And just let's pause for a moment and think about that. Let's think about different ways we could identify with and appropriate Christ's work on the cross. We could say, and rightly so, at the cross, Jesus died for sinners. And I am a sinner, and therefore I conclude, Jesus died for me.

Or we might say, well, at the cross, Jesus died for His people, and I, by grace, am amongst His people. And so I can declare, Jesus died for me. And that is true. Or we can say, at the cross, on that cross, that very cross at Golgotha, on that very day, Jesus died for me. He gave Himself for me.

Jesus loved me and gave Himself for me. He bore my sins. He died in my place. This is what Paul is glorying in. This is what stirs his heart. The Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

There is a cosmic grandeur to the revelation of God's love at Calvary. But there is also an intimately personal dimension. He loved me and gave Himself for me. Is that something that you can say? Can you testify to that in your own experience? The Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

But then in this verse, we turn to what we're calling the third act in this drama of salvation, located, chronologically we might say, in our own present reality. The experience of God's love, our experience of God's love, your experience, my experience of God's love.

[ 16 : 57 ] Paul moves from the historic event at Calvary to his own personal and present experience of God's love.

He speaks of his coming to Christ, of his conversion, and of his continuing Christian walk and experience. And he does so by highlighting two realities in that experience, the death he has died and the life he now lives. These are the two aspects that he speaks of in this verse, the death he has died and the life that he now lives. It's almost as if his coming to faith has involved a kind of spiritual reenactment of the Savior's experience of death and resurrection. Though we say that carefully and guardedly. Let's think of these two aspects that Paul speaks of the death we die. What does Paul say there in verse 20 at the very beginning, I have been crucified with Christ. This is Paul speaking of his own personal experience. I have been crucified with Christ. Coming to faith in Christ has involved a death, his death. Paul knew that a crucifixion had taken place within himself as he was enabled to place his trust in the crucified Savior.

Now this is not of course in any way equivalent to Christ's death. Paul's death is not atoning in character, but it is death in a real though spiritual sense. He has died to a whole way of life. The old man centered on self has died, it's that radical. Becoming a Christian is not some kind of moral reformation or some kind of spiritual makeover. It is about dying to self. It is about being crucified with Christ.

The death we die. The death Paul died. I have been crucified with Christ. But there's another aspect to his present experience of God's love and that is the life that he lives. How does Paul speak of that? Well, he goes on there in verse 20. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The death we die is followed as night follows day. By the new life we live.

We might perhaps more appropriately say as day follows night. We are resurrected to a new life. Now Paul uses language here that if we look at it by itself and in isolation could perhaps be misunderstood. Is Paul saying here that his own identity and personality have become totally subsumed in his new resurrection identity. Now that clearly did not happen. The evidence of his own letters and how his own personality and character are to be found in what he says and the manner in which he says it.

[ 20 : 16 ] Indeed in this very verse makes it clear that Paul is still Paul. Paul has not disappeared from the picture all together. But it is or he is a new Paul who has emerged or been reborn. A Paul governed by the one who is now, he is now united to by the one who now indwells him. Christ by the Spirit indwells Paul and gives him new desires and new new aspirations and new priorities and new loyalties. A desire for God, a desire for holiness, a desire for heaven. And we could go on. Paul then goes on to explain the manner in which he lives this new life.

Paul says it is lived by faith in Christ. Paul is now wholly dependent on Christ. Confidence in self that he had in abundance before this death. His failed attempts at law keeping have now been replaced by faith in Christ, who kept the law perfectly for Paul, and who now increasingly enables and empowers Paul to keep the very same law that had previously enslaved him. We haven't made any reference thus far to the context of this verse and indeed of this passage within Paul's letter to the Galatians. And there's a sense in which the verse is one that we can think about on a standalone basis if you wish. But it is worth just mentioning that the context of this verse indeed of the whole letter is the presence of those within the church who were arguing that to believe in justification by faith alone was a sure recipe for sin and license. And Paul's rigorous and heartfelt response is that the opposite is the case. A man who by faith has died with Christ has died with Christ and risen again to new life united to Christ is a man transformed. It is not just his standing before God which has changed, though that has indeed changed.

It is the man himself. He is a new creature. He is a new man in whom Christ lives and governs. Well, so much for Paul. What about you? Of course, what Paul says of himself is true of every believer.

But does your life, does my life give evidence of having been crucified with Christ and resurrected to new life? Is it visible on the outside that Christ lives in your inside? Of course, we all fall short.

Paul fell short. But are you becoming little by little more and more like Jesus? We look back into eternity and marvel at the eternal love of God for us, the Son of God who loved me.

[ 23 : 37 ] We look to Calvary. We will be doing that very especially as we gather at the Lord's table in a moment, and marvel at that pivotal demonstration of God's love for us in history. He gave himself for me.

But what of the third act in the drama? What of our present reality? May God help us to daily die to sin and self and live by and for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for your Son. We thank you for your love. We thank you that your love is indeed an everlasting love. You have loved us with an everlasting love. You love us now with an everlasting love, and you will ever love us with an everlasting love. We thank you that by the work of your Spirit, by the work of your Spirit, you have enabled us to embrace your Son, Jesus, as our Savior, and so be able, with Paul, to declare concerning him, the Son of Man, who loved me and gave himself for me.

We pray that as we participate now in the Lord's Supper, you would remind us anew of truths that perhaps are very familiar to us, of spiritual realities that we have heard and spoken of so often, but that we would be reminded anew and afresh of the depth and breadth and height of your love for us, demonstrated in the person of your Son and in the giving of himself to death in our place. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.