

God Is Love

All You Need is Love: Pt.1

We are starting a new series today. We're in the coldest, darkest, most depressing month of the year...so *of course* thoughts turn to love! Valentines is tomorrow - in case you forgot, gentlemen – and so this month I want to talk about the concept of love. The Fab Four sang “All You Need Is Love” and I would agree, but before you get to that, we really need a little of the 90's Euro-tech-trash anthem, “What is Love?”

As Christians, of course, we know from **1 John 4:16** that, “*God is love.*” But what does that mean exactly? It's interesting. We live in a time in which there is all kinds of spiritual searching and everybody seems to disagree about almost *everything* about God and spirituality, but there's one area in our modern society today where there's tremendous consensus about God. The polls show it. The research shows it. There's one thing almost everybody agrees with. Almost everybody. Even the people who don't believe in God say, “*If there is a God, then...*” Everybody agrees if there is a God, or whatever else God is, God is a God of love.

According to the most recent stats from the Pew Research Center – I think this was 2018 – in response to the statement “God loves all people regardless of their faults”, 97% of those who believe in the “God of the Bible” agreed. But 69% of the people who just believe in some higher power or spiritual force agreed as well.

And that's the reason this morning I want to delve into a psalm that is unbelievably relevant for us today. Here are three reasons why. First, this psalm *starts* at a place where everybody today already believes and already agrees on. That is, this psalm is about the love of God. That's what the whole theme is: the unflinching love, the great love of God. It's Psalm 107 and it is literally bookended by God's love. First verse, **Psalm 107:1**, “*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.*”

And then it ends with God's love again, but in a way that is rather surprising. Look at **verse 43**, “*Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD.*” Now, we don't think of love as something to be “considered”. If anything, love is something to be “felt.” We might even say to a single coworker, “Don't *overthink* it.” But that's not what we're told here. Love – especially the love of God - must be *considered*.

And if you understand the word “consider”, you’ll see it’s a very rich command. The word consider means “to puzzle, to stare at, to ponder, to figure out.” Now you say, “What do you need to figure out?” And that’s the point. The point is the author says *unless* you have looked at the love of God to the point that it makes you puzzle and you see the richness of it...If the love of God has never moved you to ponder it deeply, you don’t understand it.

But there’s a promise. **Verse 43** says, “*Whoever is wise, let him heed these things...*” “The *wise* ones heed these things.” Wisdom in the Hebrew worldview is not data. This is huge for us in the internet Information Age. Wisdom is not just being able to find the facts on the Google-verse. That’s not wisdom. Winning trivia night down at the pub is not getting any wiser. No matter how much information you have in your head, that doesn’t make you wiser.

Wisdom in the Hebrew worldview is transformed character through encounter with the living God. And therefore, this writer – we’re not told who authored Psalm 107 – the author is promising something. They’re saying, “If you ponder the love of God, if you *puzzle* over it, if you *consider* it sufficiently, rightly, properly, if you consider it *deeply*, your life will be changed. Your heart will be transformed.” Now that’s quite an invitation, isn’t it? In fact, the psalm is an invitation to do that. The psalm is a *guide* to doing it.

So let’s take up the invitation. You say, “Do I have a choice?” Well, not corporately, but individually you could just snooze. But come with us, okay? And here’s what we learn; three things. *Where* do we consider the love of God, *what* do we consider about the love of God, and *how* do we consider it? Where is the Psalm calling us to consider it, what are we called to consider, and how?

Now first, **Where do we consider the love of God?**

And that might sound like a very odd question. Let me put it to you like this. Where does the *idea* of the love of God come from? Where does the idea of a *loving* God come from? What is the source of that idea? Where can we go to consider it? Now I know from experience that a lot of people find that to be something of an irrelevant question.

You say, “Wait a minute. What do you mean *where* does the idea of a loving God come from? It doesn’t *come* from someplace. It’s common sense. It’s something I just know. I just *know* it. I just believe it. What do you mean where did I *get* it? I didn’t get it from anywhere; I just know it. Common knowledge.”

Well, let’s test that thesis out. It’s a thesis. Let’s test out the thesis that this idea of a loving God didn’t come from somewhere; it’s just something we know. The *vast* majority of Americans believe God is a God of love. Do they just know it? Let’s try the thesis out.

First of all, let's look at history. If you look at history, do you see that people historically have just *known* there's a loving God - that it's just commonplace, something you see coming up through ancient cultures in history? And the answer is no. Rudolf Otto was a prominent German religious historian in the early 20th century. He wrote a very important book in 1923 called *The Idea of the Holy* that has never gone out of print in 100 years.

It's a survey of the concept of the divine in ancient cultures. He coined the term "numinous" which means desire laced with fear. Here's a quote, "The divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm, and the creature, who trembles before it, utterly cowed and cast down, has always at the same time the impulse to turn to it." He says *all* ancient cultures believed the presence of the divine had to be mediated, it was threatening. You needed priests. You needed rituals. You needed sacrifices. You needed *something*.

And the idea that's *completely* prevalent now - that is, if you want to talk to God, He's just a loving being and you just lift your eyes and your mind to the sky and just *speak* to Him - that is an utterly new idea. You *don't* get that from history. People have *not* just known that.

So where did it come from? Let's take a look at the world religions. Did it come from the religions of the world? Is this common sense among the religions of the world?

I think Christians are too often insensitive to the riches in other religions. I don't want to encourage that kind of insensitivity, but we have to ask this question: Does the idea of a personal God with whom you can have a loving relationship come from the great religions of the world? And the answer there is absolutely not. And if that surprises you, I'll tell you why it probably surprises you.

It probably surprises you because, in this culture, people *desperately* want to believe all religions are the same. I haven't completely figured out why, but I think it has something to do with that fact that if all religions are actually alike then you don't actually have to listen carefully to *any* of them. You don't have to really listen to what they're saying! "Oh, I know. We all believe in a loving God, and if you just live in a certain good way and all that, you can find... You're all going up the mountain in different paths," and so on.

We desperately want to believe that so we don't have to *listen* – we don't have to listen to their voices, so we don't have to consider what they have to say. But if you do listen, here's what you're going to find out.

Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Hinduism don't believe in a personal God. In fact, in original Buddhism, it's not just they don't believe in a loving God, but love *itself* is part of the illusion of individual self you have to get beyond to get to enlightenment. This is why Anakin Skywalker can't have a girlfriend!

And if you go to Islam; over the years I always thought, "Islam, like Christianity, believes in a loving God, a merciful God." And then after 9/11 I watched a dialogue between Muslim clerics and Christian pastors – and Jewish Rabbis actually – trying to find some consensus. And I was surprised that the Muslims themselves pushed back on this. They actually said, "You're not *listening*. You're pushing us into *your* mold." They said, "In our understanding, God is almighty, but He is not a friend or a father. And God is merciful, but you cannot have a personal love relationship with Him. Listen!"

And so the point is the idea of a personal loving God you can have a personal relationship with is *absolutely* not out there amongst the world religions either. Well somebody says, "Modern people get it just from reflecting on life, reflecting on the world. You see the stars, you see the heavens, you see the oceans, you see

the streams, you see the rivers, and when you look out there and see all that beauty you just know there's a loving God behind it." Oh really? You'd better look more carefully.

One very brilliant writer took a good look years ago and won a Pulitzer Prize for it. Annie Dillard wrote a book called *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. It's a fantastic book – I sat out in the sunshine on Tuesday and read the whole thing. Highly recommend. She lived by a stream in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia, and she just wrote what she observed. She says, actually, she had originally expected she was going to learn the ways of nature and conform her life to it. This was 1972, so kind of a hippie thing.

She wrote this when she was 27 and starting to get jaded with modern civilization, so like Thoreau she decided to get back to nature and just get in tune with the natural world. And what she found appalled her. Because she *did* look and she *did* watch and she *did observe* nature, and she saw nothing but violence, absurdity, and waste.

She was particularly shaken when she saw a giant water bug latch itself onto a frog, inject it with a venom that literally turns the inside of the frog to mush, and then suck it out like a smoothie. She watched the frog just deflate. She saw the eyes go dim and then saw the skull collapse as his brain turned to juice and out it came. And she never got over it.

And she started studying what the books say about evolution. And she saw it, and then she studied it, and she pronounced it, “Wonderful things wasted. It’s a wretched system.” Here is her analogy: Say you are the manager of the Southern Railroad. You figure that you need three engines for a stretch of track...it’s a mighty steep grade. So at fantastic effort and expense you have your shops make nine thousand engines...You send all nine thousand of them out on the runs, no one is manning the switches. The engines crash, collide, derail, jump, jam, burn. At the end of the massacre you have three engines, which is what the run could support in the first place.

You go to your board of directors and show them what you’ve done. And what are they going to say? You know what they’re going to say. They’re going to say: It’s a hell of a way to run a railroad.” She says, “Is it a better way to run a universe?” Because that’s how the universe is run. A single fish will birth a *thousand* eggs into the stream in the hope that *ten* survive.

She says, “Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me...Must I then part ways with the only world I know? I had thought to live by the side of the creek in order to shape my life to its free flow. But I seem to have reached a point where I must draw the line. It looks as if the creek is not buoying me up but dragging me down.”

“Look: Cock Robin may die the most gruesome of slow deaths, and nature is no less pleased; the sun comes up, the creek rolls on, the survivors still sing. I cannot feel that way about your death, nor you about mine, nor either of us about the robin’s. **We value the individual supremely, and nature values him not a whit.** It looks for the moment as though I might have to reject this creek life unless I want to be utterly brutalized.” (P.177-179)

What she’s saying is, if you look out at nature, if you just look at the *world* - look at disease and death, look at wars - look at the world, she says you might *perhaps* discern with unaided reason and reflection a *power* behind it, a powerful Creator. You might discern a powerful God, but you’re *never* going to discern a loving God. Never. So if you look into history, if you look into the world religions, and if you just look at nature and the world at large, you would *never* come up with the idea of a loving God. Where did it come from?

I will tell you where it comes from. It tells you right in our text, “If you want to consider the love of God, heed *these things*.” What are these things? They are listed over and over as we read the psalm. God’s wonderful *deeds* in history, the *deeds* of God as they’re revealed in the Bible. See the psalmist doesn’t say, “Ponder the great love of God by looking at nature. Ponder the love of God by looking at history.” No. What does he say? There is a God who has revealed himself to Abraham and to Moses.

Psalm 107 is a great work of art. The structure itself is just brilliant literary form. I wish I could read you the whole thing – I really thought about – but it is *so* long. But *you* should read it. It's going to be something of a template for our whole series, so maybe read it on your own this week. But it tells about four groups of people. A stanza for each group: the wanderers, the prisoners, the people who are sick, the people caught in storms – they represent all of us. They're the kinds of situations we *all* face.

We'll look at that in a second. *But* they also are what the children of Israel had to go through. In other words, they were literally wandering, *but God* appeared to them in clouds and fire and took them to the Promised Land. They were in prison, *but God* parted the Red Sea.

In other words, only in the Bible does the original idea of a loving God come into human consciousness. When I say the only place you're going to find a God of love is in the Bible, I don't mean everybody today who believes in the love of God must have gotten it from the Bible. I'm saying *the source* for human thinking of the very idea of the love of God would not have occurred to people. It wouldn't have come from other sources. It came from the Bible, and here's why.

Because the Bible gives us *a framework*. A three-fold framework. In the Bible, God says, "I created the world good, but the world has sinned and fallen, and therefore nothing works right now. Nature is red in tooth and claw. People are at each other's throats. I created...and the good creation has fallen...but I'm breaking back into the world to heal it and redeem it." Got that? Creation, fall, redemption. The Bible says *that* is the framework through which you need to understand everything that happens. Good creation...sin and fall...in-breaking redemption.

And here's why you have to do that. Only in that framework does a loving God make sense. Why was Annie Dillard so confused? She says, "*God did this?*" Well, here's the point. If you only have a God who created the world - if you have creation not fall, if God created the world this way - He's not a loving God. Nature is simply too cruel.

Or if you don't just have creation but you have creation and *fall*. What if God created things good and things have fallen but now God has just let us go, God has just left us to it? I learned a new favorite Latin phrase, *Deus Abscondis* – the God who ran off. God hasn't come back in the person of His Son. God has not reengaged. God hasn't gotten involved. Well, you *still* don't have a loving God.

If you have *only* creation, if God just created the world this way, He can't be a God of love. It makes no sense. Or if He created the world and it fell and He's not breaking in in some miraculous way to do something about it. If He didn't come down in the person of His Son, for example, if He's not breaking in and speaking and revealing Himself, you see, a loving God makes no sense.

But here's what we have today. Where did the modern Western world get the idea of a loving God? It came from the Bible. But it has taken the idea of a loving God out, and it has just spread it everywhere. Everybody believes it, but they've left everything *else* behind. The Bible, of course, isn't the way the Western world thinks of things anymore.

So it has this *idea* of a loving God, and you pull it away from the framework of the Bible, and no wonder everybody is so bummed out. "If God is a God of love, why doesn't He answer my prayers? I prayed and prayed and prayed and I'm still not married. I prayed and prayed and my child died of cancer. How could God be a God of love?" Everybody is sold this bill of goods. It's *plundered* from the Bible. It's taken out of the Bible without the rest of the framework.

It's hard to believe in the love of God even *inside* the framework. Inside the framework God says, "I created the world. It is fallen and I'm breaking back in to redeem it." Well, there's *still* a lot of questions, like, "Okay, all right. Why haven't you done it yet? Why are you taking so long? Why are you doing it in a particular way?" But at least in that framework it explains *why* nature is red in tooth and claw, and it also proves God is not *away* from all the suffering.

See, if you don't believe in Jesus, if you don't believe in the incarnation, if you don't believe in the Bible, if you don't believe in the God of the Bible, then the very *idea* of a loving God makes no sense at all. Take away that framework and you'll never ponder it. Now what does that mean practically? It's very simple. If there's anybody in this room who has been trying to find a loving God by communing with your own heart or communing with nature, if you've said, "Well, the Bible is full of fables; we can't accept that anymore, but I want to believe in a loving God," you're *doomed*.

At this point, I'm *not* trying to prove the God of the Bible is true. And I'm not even saying that apart from the Bible you can't find any kind of God and nobody believes in God unless you believe in the Bible and nobody knows anything about God.

I'm just trying to say only in the Bible do you have a framework that makes sense of a *loving* God. *Only* if you look at His wonderful deeds, only if you look at His self-revelation embedded in *history*, only if you heed *these things* are you going to find that loving God.

So if you're interested in the concept of a loving God, what I'm trying to argue is you need to at least *try* the Bible. You need to come here and listen to it taught or go to a small group or go to some other church where it's taught. You need, though, to *consider* the love of God in the Bible, or you're not going to have an encounter with the God of love.

That's the first point. It's pretty critical. It's actually a good point to make at the *very* beginning, in a sense, of a New Year – this is traditionally the time people begin to fall off the wagon of their resolutions. Maybe some of you set spiritual goals. Why do you need to stick with the Scripture? Why do you need a plan for regular Bible reading? Why do you need to ponder these stories, even if you're not sure about them? You have no alternative if you want to find a loving God. Okay? So number one; *Where* do you consider the love of God? In the Word, in the Scriptures, in the narratives of His great deeds, in His self-revelation.

Number two, What do you consider? Now again, the best way to understand what the psalmist is trying to show us is you have to look at the poem as a whole. It's really brilliant. You have to look at the artistic structure of the poem. Now what is the artistic structure? Again, you have four *utterly different* groups of people, and yet *every single one* of them gets the same treatment. Each stanza follows a five part pattern: the group faces a particular crisis, as a result of the crisis they are suffering, they cry out to God, God brings deliverance, and they give thanks to God.

Let me show you the first one: **Psalm 107:4-5**, “*Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away.*” What's their crisis? They were lost. Wanderers in the desert. They cry out to God. God gives them what they need. What do they need? They need a city. They need shelter and protection. The homeless people need a home.

And in ancient cultures, the one who provided a home was the father. You see, nowadays, people go to cities to get away from their families, but back then, you couldn't have a family unless you were in a city. You looked for a city to *have* a family. They would refer to their home as “the city of our fathers”.

“What do you mean?” Well, you couldn’t have a home without stability, without safety. You had to get behind walls. Otherwise, the wild animals would come get you. Otherwise, the raiders and the robbers would come get you. And these were people who were looking for a city, but what they were *really* looking for was a home. They were homeless, and they needed stability and safety, and God loves them as a *father*. That’s the first stanza. God’s love as a providing father.

The second stanza, **v.10**, “*Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains...*” Ok, what do you have here? Condemned prisoners. What do they need? They don’t need a providing *father* to come and say, “Here are some sandwiches.” They need a liberator. They need a general. They need a king. They need someone at the head of an army, and that’s what they get. It says he cuts through the bars of iron.

Now let’s look at the third group. **V.17**, “*Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.*” Now these people are sick. It’s very interesting, because look at the next verse it says (**v.18**), “*They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death.*” That means they really are dying. They are wasting away physically, but remember we’re told it’s as the result

of their foolishness. Not just bad luck – a famine or something. These are more like people who have ruined their lives, ruined their bodies, through overwork or addiction or something.

And look at what heals them. They too cry out to God and, **V.20**, “*He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.*” What they need is a healer, but what they’re actually getting, in a sense, is a counselor. What heals them? Look carefully. He sent forth *his word*. They get some kind of word. They get some kind of advice that heals them. They get some kind of loving, healing counselor. So the first group needs a father. The second group needs a king. The third group needs a nurse, a counselor, a loving person at their side.

The fourth group, **v.23**, “*Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters.*” Just business people trying to make a living in the world. And what happened? (**V.26**) “*They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.*” That’s the 100-foot wave. The perfect storm. What do they need? They need an omnipotent creator – someone with power over the sea. But who’s also their friend – someone who cares enough to *exercise* that power over the sea. So they need an omnipotent friend.

Now what's intriguing about this - look at this: father, king, lover, creator/friend, someone who has power over the hurricane, lord of the storm. They're incredibly different scenarios and sections, and yet...the *same* words follow each time. It's verse 8, verse 15, verse 21, and then I'll actually read you **v.31**, but all identical, "*Let them give thanks to the LORD for his **unfailing** love and his wonderful deeds for mankind.*" Every time, extreme diversity, and yet the same unfailing love. What's the point?

The point is these different love personas - father, king, lover, friend - are *extremely* different, but they are *equally* basic. They are *equally* ultimate. They are *equally* essential to who God is. They are *equally* God's unfailing love. Now, you say, "So?" So...*this* is what you're supposed to consider, and this is very, very difficult.

I was doing a discipleship group over in my library – sometime before COVID when we still meeting in person for things like that – and I remember we had a pretty intense discussion about some Biblical topic. And at the end I asked, "So what did you learn this morning?" And one woman said, "Well, I've learned that God is a complex character." And that's really true. And complex doesn't just mean, "Boy, God's confusing." No, it's much more than that. Let me explain it this way.

When you see a bad movie – boy, I saw a real stinker last Sunday night. So bad in fact that it was kind of good. We had fun laughing and mocking the actors right there in the theatre. Just obnoxious about it. My thesis was that a group of 9th grade theatre students won a contest and the grand prize was Hollywood would turn your story into a real live movie! The script, the dialogue was just terrible. Subsequently, the characters were all so wooden I left with splinters. They were all stereotypes. Just very one-dimensional.

And therefore we didn't engage with any of them. Didn't care about any of them. They'd die what were supposed to be such spectacular deaths and I would laugh. Why? Because they were basically cartoon characters. I don't cry when the bomb blows off Daffy Duck's beak, I laugh. Because that's what you do with cartoons. They're not *portrayed* as complex characters.

Real people are complex. Real people have all kinds of apparent contradictions in them. Real people aren't one-dimensional. And so some people – when they get into the Bible – they expect a one-dimensional God. Some people predispose a God who just loves everyone and accepts everyone, you know - friend and lover! Or others may presume a no-nonsense king who *smites* those who disobey him. But when you actually engage with the Bible, you find a God who is *both* - or a God is *neither* – but the Biblical God is an enigma. He is *real*. God is a complex character.

And so the psalmist is saying that we always have a tendency to *reduce* God. We have a tendency to think of God as a friend and a lover *mainly*...and not as a king and as a sovereign. We don't like the idea of punishment. We don't like the idea of hell. We get rid of that. He's a lover. He's a friend. *Or* plenty of people see God as a king, as a sovereign. He's very majestic, He's very holy, and the idea of a friend is sort of secondary. It's not really the main thing.

Nobody holds these things all together in tension. And what the psalmist is saying is you have to see them as all equally ultimate. Do *not* prefer one over the other. Everybody has their preferred view of God – and usually it reflects your own personality. If you're a driven A-type, then *of course* God is too. And if you're a softer, nurturing type, well *of course* that's what God is as well.

Everybody prefers. And the psalmist says, "Don't you dare," because you reduce Him. He'll never be real to you, God will never be someone you encounter, unless you let Him be **complex**. And what that means is when you do read the Bible, you can't throw parts out you don't like, because then you have a cartoon God, a God you're not going to be engaged with.

You're not going to be any more engaged with Him than you are when Halle Berry tries to save the moon. "We can't nuke the moon. My *ex-wife* is on that moon and she's *never* let me down!" My *goodness* that was bad! They're cartoon characters. And the psalmist is saying if you ever want to actually encounter the living God, you're going to have to actually let Him be the complex character He is. Do not make any one of these love personas - father, king, lover, friend – don't let any of them become the ultimate, the exclusive. Don't release the tension. You say, "Well what does that mean?" Let's get practical.

Lastly, How does considering the love of God really change you? And here's the answer. First of all, if you let that happen...and almost none of us do. All of us fall off the horse on one side and usually get back on and fall off the other side. None of us continually hold the tension. But if you do, the first thing that's going to happen is you'll start to see the impossibility of God's love. God's love will never change your life until you see it is *impossible*. Let me show you what I mean. Why do people not hold on to all of these personas? Why do we tend, for example, to see him more as a king and as a power, or more as a lover and a friend? Why is it nobody holds the tension together? Because we sense there's a contradiction. We sense there's an impossibility. We sense it can't be *all* of these things, and we try to *solve* the contradiction – resolve the tension - ourselves.

So the typical, traditional values approach - the typical conservative “red-state” approach - is to say, “Well God is a king, and if I live a good life, then He’ll love me.” Well, there’s no impossibility about that kind of love, right? It also won’t transform you. It also won’t amaze you. It won’t lead you to say, “Give thanks to the Lord!” There will be no praise. There will be no gratitude. Oh no, not a bit. Because you’ll say, “Of course he loves me; I’ve lived a good life. I’ve *earned* the love of the King.” That’s where you’ve made the King and the power and the Creator *more* than the grace and the love on the other side.

Then there’s the liberal, sort of postmodern “blue-state” approach. They say, “Well if there *is* a God, He accepts *everyone*. We don’t believe in hell. We don’t believe in judgment day.” Now that approach *also* says, “I have the love of God.” But that’s not impossible love either. There’s nothing impossible about *that* kind of God loving us. Right? But it won’t transform you. It won’t lead you to thanks and praise. It won’t lead you to amazement. It won’t lead you to say, “*Oh*, that men and women would *see* the grace of God...” That’s what this psalm is all about. It won’t happen.

Until you see that God’s love is impossible because God is all of these things - until you see the contradiction, until you’re *troubled* by it, until you’re *perplexed* by it - you’ll never be *changed* by it. You say, “What do you mean?” Well, let me just give you one example, a

perfect example of how this *psalmist* refuses to choose one side or the other and sees the impossibility of it.

Look at the second stanza again, **v.10**, “*Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains...*” And they cry out. Look down here in **verse 13-14**, “*Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and **he saved them** from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and **broke away their chains.***” You say, “Okay, so what’s so weird about that?”

This is an astounding passage. *Whose bars are these? Whose gates are these? Whose chains are these? And why are they chained? V.11*, “*...for they had rebelled against the words **of God** and despised the counsel of **the Most High.***” Immediately you’re beginning to realize this is looking at a spiritual condition. These people are in prison because they broke the word of God. (**v.12**), “*So **He** subjected them to bitter labor...*”

They’re in *God’s* prison! They’re behind *His* gates. They’re shackled with *His* chains. And they cry out to God, and He cuts through them. What do you mean? He cuts through *His own* bars. He breaks off *His own* chains. You say, “Wait a minute. This is really weird.” Yes, it is. Here’s why it’s so weird. If He was *just* a friend, if He was just this big loving God - you might say if He was the liberal God - He never would have put them in prison in the first place.

He would have said, “Well, you’re my friends and you did wrong, but let bygones-be-bygones. And besides that, everybody has to find out what’s right or wrong for themselves.” And he’d have never put them in. But if He was a conservative God - if He was a *king* only - He’d put them behind bars and they’d cry out and He would say, “What are you talking about? You’re guilty. I can’t let you out. I’m tough on crime.”

If He’s *only* a king He can’t let them out. If He’s *only* a friend He would never put them in. But He puts them in, and then He *cuts through His own bars!* Now you say, “How could that be? That’s impossible. That’s a contradiction.” Yes. Now you’re on the road to a changed life. Until you see the contradiction, until you see the impossibility, you’ll never be amazed at God’s love.

If you work it out yourself - if you resolve it toward traditional conservative values or you resolve it toward liberal relativism - if you resolve the love of God in one way or the other, you’ll never be changed by it. Don’t you see? You’ll never be amazed. The psalmist is *amazed* that He would cut through His *own* bars, that He would do all this. Of *course* he’s amazed. Of *course* he can’t believe it. Until you see the impossibility, you’ll never be changed.

Somebody says, “Well, I don’t get it. How could God be *both* king and a friend? How could God be both the one who puts them in jail and then the one who cuts them out? I don’t get it. How could that be?” You are so lucky! You live in the right age of the world. Because you know, the psalmist had no idea how it could be, and he was still transformed by it. He just knew this God gives us an impossible love, a love that’s utterly impossible, a love that *can’t* happen - a love we have to have, we’ve got to have His unfailing love, but it just can’t happen - and yet God does it anyway.

And that was enough to change the psalmist, even though he or she doesn’t know how that could be. But you and I do. We know how. We ought to be much more changed than this author is. We ought to be much godlier. We ought to be much happier. We ought to be much more joyful. Why? We know how.

How? The reason God can take us out of the deep darkness and deep gloom is that on the cross, darkness and deep gloom came down on God’s Son. The reason God can take us home is because Jesus said, “Foxes have holes. Birds have nests. The Son of Man doesn’t have a place to put his head.” The reason we can be healed in our afflictions is that he has borne our infirmities. The reason we can have the calm, the stilled storm, is because he was the great Jonah who was thrown into the belly of wrath, the belly of the justice of God.

See, on the cross - and only on the cross - do you have a complex God, do you have a real God, do you have a non-cartoon God, a God who gives you impossible love that transforms your life. Do you get that?

Because if you don't believe in the cross... You say, "I don't believe in this idea of blood and substitution and Jesus having to die on the cross." All right. If you don't believe in the cross, then either you think God is a king and if you're good enough God will take you to heaven - that's a one-dimensional cartoon God of the conservative brand - or else you believe, "I don't believe God needed anyone to die. I believe he just loves everybody." That's a one-dimensional cartoon God of the liberal brand. Only on the cross is God allowed to be **complex**. Only on the cross is God allowed to be **real**.

So the first thing is do you see the impossibility? And then do you see how Jesus Christ made the impossible possible? Do you see how Jesus Christ cut through the bars? *He's* our lover...but he is our king. *He* is the calmer of the storm...and *He* is the wonderful counselor. He is *everything*. And once you see that, how do you receive that love into your life? It's very simple. Every single time, all they do is cry. Do you notice that?

The first group, it's not their fault they're homeless, and the last group, it's not their fault they're on the high seas in the storm. They're blameless, but they *cry*. The second group is guilty. The third group are stupid. They're idiots. And all *they* do is cry. Because now the love of God does not come on the basis of your merit. It doesn't come on the basis of your pedigree. It doesn't come on the basis of whether you're from the east, the west, the north, or the south. That's what verse 3 is all about. It doesn't matter who you are. Now it comes to who?

The *only* requirement now for the love of God is that you see you can't possibly fulfill the requirements. All you need is *nothing*. If you come with *something*, you'll never get it. All you need is need. All you need is nothing. If you don't think you're a Christian, or you don't know you're a Christian, or if you're *not* a Christian and you know it, this is how you do it.

"Consider the great love of God." See the impossibility of His love. See it resolved in Jesus Christ. Let that dawn on you. Find it in the biblical narratives of God's wonderful deeds through Jesus. If you *are* a Christian and yet you find you, yourself, are not a person of praise - if you say, "There's not much joy in my life; I'm not like this psalmist," - go back to the sources.

Maybe *you* have a cartoon God. Maybe you're not looking at life in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. Maybe you're not looking at life and seeing God as a father and a king and a friend and a lover. Maybe you're missing one of those. Maybe you have a cartoon God. For the next four weeks we're going to look at each one of those: God as father, God as lover, God as king, God as friend, and that'll strengthen us. Okay? All you need is love, right? Right. So consider the great love of God.

Let's pray...