

LOVED SO MUCH

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The HH-3F settled on its pad like a mighty bird returning from an exhausting flight. Though noisy, the landing was beautiful. The giant helicopter, weighing approximately sixteen thousand pounds, carrying four thousand additional pounds of fuel, had safely borne her crew back from a hazardous, attempted-rescue mission at sea.

For three hours, six courageous and highly skilled men had penetrated the fog, searching for a fishing vessel. Its captain had contacted the Coast Guard station at Saint Petersburg, Florida, reporting that a member of his crew had sustained a broken leg and needed medical attention.

Back on the ground, occupants of the aircraft gracefully and carefully disembarked. There were brief comments and admiring gestures between air and ground crews. The last man to leave the craft was the flight surgeon, dressed in fire-resistant gear topped off with an extraordinary white helmet.

At the first opportunity, the Commander asked, "How did it go, Son?"

"Not too well," he replied. "The fog was too dense.... They would not allow us to approach, let alone make a rescue."

I can almost imagine a similar conversation, following a far more remarkable flight, when Jesus arrived back at the Throne of God after His first visit to earth.

"How did it go, Son?"

"Not too well," he replied. "The fog of unbelief and pride was too dense.... They would not allow Me to approach, let alone make a rescue."

This dramatic story brings into focus the incalculable, persistent love of God, who sent His Son on the greatest of all search and rescue missions. In His case, of course, all was not lost.

John 3:17-18 (NLT)

God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son.

These verses immediately follow what may well be the best known verse in the entire Bible, John 3:16 – “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, so that whoever trusts in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life.”

So Loved

God loved the world—not the terra firma, not the physical earth, but the people who inhabit it. We know this because the impact of His love was for those who would choose to trust in Him—a capacity that belongs solely to human beings; for all the rest of the creation, there is no choice involved.

God so loved—the measure of His love, comparable to the measure of our need, was the gift of His own true Son—in life, in death, in resurrection, and in exaltation.

That He gave—true love is giving. In fact, there is no love where there is no giving. And God gave us His very best.

Whoever—God’s gift is universally available, for God is not willing that *any* should perish; therefore, His gift was offered for every human being, no one was excluded or overlooked.

Whoever trusts in Him—it comes down to personal confidence, personal relationship; no distance, no interference, simply receiving His loving embrace.

Should not perish—“perish” is beyond physical death; it signifies complete destruction of soul and body away from the presence of the Lord. But not for the one who trusts in Him. Never.

But have everlasting life—life with God, who made us; life in its fullness, now and evermore, without decline, without end.

Not To Judge

Then, these two verses (17-18). They are, in fact, the application of that favored verse, as taught by Jesus Christ Himself. Yet, somehow, many people, including many Christians, are not well-acquainted with these verses, and suffer much confusion as a result.

While we say we believe that “God so loved the world,” too many of us think and act as though He only loved *some* and only *somewhat*. Therefore, our own love also tends to be targeted and reserved.

While we frequently declare that “Jesus saves,” many people live as though “Jesus punishes.” Difficulties and setbacks are viewed by many as evidence of God’s displeasure or punishment for sins (whether known or unknown), and are met with terror and misery.

The fact is, that these very trials have been thoughtfully predicted in the New Testament in the context of God's sovereign grace, so that we might meet them with enduring faith and joy. And He promised to work them out for our good. For instance...

James 1

² *Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.*

1 Peter 1

⁶ *So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. ⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.*

God did not predict such hardships as a *threat* (lest we should become overly happy because of our salvation). Actually, it was a kindness—to spare us confusion and guide us to safety. If you are piloting a ship into harbor, you would want a chart of some kind that shows where the water is deep enough and free from obstructions, in order to slip into the dock safely. As someone has said, “It is a profound mercy that God should chart the reefs and rocks that lie beneath the surface of daily life, lest we run aground and perish.”

Christian Superstition

God *did not* send His Son into the world to judge or punish the world. It's there in black-and-white; it could not be plainer. But too often we ignore the plain truth and instead cling to our superstitious fears.

For some, this is the result of misunderstanding the Trinity. Some people actually believe there are three Gods, not one, like a family of three. As a result of this misconception, they conclude that while Jesus loves us, the Father is still angry with us, and Christ cannot avert the punishments the Father will inflict.

The doctrine of the Trinity, correctly understood reveals one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three are *so united* in heart, thought, purpose, and deed that there is no division at all—no separation, no disagreement, no conflict—like Siamese triplets, if you can imagine it, who share the same heart and brain. Each one feels, thinks, speaks, and acts, exactly like the others—they are One.

It is not possible for one person of the Triune God to love, while another hates; nor for one to be pleased with me, while another is angry with me; nor for one to comfort you, while another terrorizes you. A good-cop/bad-cop scenario is not possible with God.

God the Father sent His Son to be His perfect representative to the world. Jesus loves the world because the Father loves the world. Jesus saves because the Father saves. Jesus does not judge us, because the Father does not judge us. That's the amazing truth, regardless of your immediate circumstances. Don't misjudge God.

Faith Leaks

For others, the notion that God is punishing us results from the dissipation of their faith. A bucket with holes cannot carry water. Faith leaks! You must have a plan for patching the holes and replenishing the supply of water. And you must work that plan!

If faith is not fed, it will leak!

Romans 10:17 (NET)

¹⁷ Consequently faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ.

If you do not feed yourself persistently on the Word of God, your faith will not grow; it will leak.

If faith is not encouraged, it will leak!

Hebrews 10:25

²⁵ And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

One cannot calculate the benefits to be derived from the fellowship of the saints. Be in church often—in small groups or large—and you will be encouraged to follow Christ; otherwise, your faith will leak.

If faith is not repeatedly built up, it will leak!

Jude 20 (MSG)

But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit.

No one can do this for you—not your mother, or your brother, or your friend, or your pastor. There is no substitute in the walk of faith for a habit of prayer; without it, faith leaks.

If faith is not actively practiced, it will leak!

James 1:22 (MSG)

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!

Don't deceive yourself, "faith" without corresponding actions is useless. You've got to put your faith, no matter how small or weak it seems, into practice, or it will leak.

Already Judged

Now, according to John 3:18, there is a pre-existing judgment in the world that is neither arbitrary, nor personal—because of the sin of unbelief; this is the cause, above everything else, of human distress and disharmony. If we refuse to trust the only Savior of the world, what option could possibly remain? (It is a universal condition, afflicting the rich and poor, the educated and the illiterate.)

But the appearance of Jesus Christ is the solution to that pandemic. Jesus turns it around, creates faith and removes judgment. He took our place and God's judgment for our sin. His shed blood has paid for our spiritual liberation.

When you put your trust in Christ, He moves you out from under the curse of the kingdom of darkness into the blessing of His Kingdom of Light. Once under a curse, now under a blessing!

Colossians 1

May you be filled with joy,¹² always thanking the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light.¹³ For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son,¹⁴ who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.

Walking in the Light

Now, let's get practical. If God SO loved us (and He has), how can we walk in that love? How can we stay there, trusting God, when things are difficult?

You have called on the name of the Lord, you have prayed for His help, yet you say, "My terrible circumstances are unchanged!" What then?

Do not fear; trust God's words.

Jesus overheard what they were talking about and said to the leader, "Don't listen to them; just trust me." (Mark 5:36; MSG)

Read the story of Jairus. Every second seemed crucial, yet the Lord delayed His response. Jairus' heart was breaking when he heard those words from the Master. Time is in His hands.

Receive God's blessing through Christ—acknowledge it, accept it, embrace it, and own it—and begin to walk in its confidence. Your trust will transform your circumstances, if you do not fear or waver.

Each day, arise and declare God's blessing over yourself, your household, your finances, and your circumstances.

Whenever Aaron and his sons bless the people of Israel in my name, I myself will bless them." (Numbers 6:27)

You have authority from God to speak blessings and resist curses.

In the authority of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, declare the promises of God.

Then the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone.'" (Luke 4:3-4)

God's words are the truth that sets you free; don't hesitate to give them voice. Speak them with conviction.

In the integrity of the Son of God, conduct yourself honorably in the midst of the trial.

He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. (1 Peter 2:23)

Trust God with the final result, while you do your part in the interim. Honor His name.

This demonstrates your confidence that Jesus will see you through and bring you out on the other side, as pure gold.

"But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold." (Job 23:10)

Who does these things? Who talks to their circumstances like this? It feels awkward when you start!

I'll tell you who: *well-trained believers* talk this way. Novices bow to their circumstances and follow their feelings, but practicing Christians speak the words of God, like Jesus did in the desert, and do what pleases Him.

Why? Because they are persuaded that God has SO loved them that He will NOT leave them helpless.

Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5)

If we endure in faith, we will surely triumph in the end. Your dark night will certainly turn to daylight.