

How Great Is His Love

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Date: 29 August 2021

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] Please turn back with me in your Bibles to 1 John chapter 3 and verse 1. See what kind of love the Father has given to us that we should be called the children of God.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher. And your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Life is an adventure. That's not to say it's always a welcome adventure or a fun adventure. But it's an adventure nonetheless. I do hope I'm not sully his reputation in any way when I tell you this story.

The late professor of Old Testament at the Free Church College related to Colin and Helen was John L. Mackay.

[1 : 12] He was by any measure an eccentric genius. A gentle giant you couldn't quite imagine, John L. Anything other than seated in his office in a suit or doing anything other than reading Hebrew poetry with a smile on his face.

But unknown to most, John L., as he liked to be called, had a secret hobby. He loved to ride on roller coasters. The scarier the better.

The loopier the better. The faster the better. He loved the adventure of theme park roller coasters. But he didn't know that, right? You can't quite imagine this antiquarian academic.

His hair quiffs being blown here and there. Roaring with laughter on the adventure of his favorite roller coaster at Alton Towers. In Luke's, John L. always reminded me of the cowardly lion in The Wizard of Oz.

But he loved nothing more than to tread his own yellow brick road in a roller coaster carriage. Life is an adventure. But then I don't need to tell you that because you know it's true.

[2 : 26] You've experienced its terrifying depths and its exhilarating heights, even in the last 18 months of pandemic. This morning I want to take you on an expedition which some of us may not yet have started on.

And others of us need to get back into. It is, let me assure you, the greatest of all adventures. The adventure of a lifetime. It is the adventure of exploring, experiencing, and expressing the love of God.

In 1 John chapter 3 verse 1, the beloved apostle John, Jesus' closest friend, who's often called the apostle of love, writes, See what kind of love the Father has given to us.

That we should be called the children of God. And so we are. This is the adventure of a Christian's lifetime, but with a twist.

Because the lifetime of which I speak is not merely this life. Filled with its disappointments and its delights. But our eternal life.

[3 : 39] Which by the sacrifice of his son, Christ Jesus, the Father has given to us. Let me encourage you, if you have not yet started out, to make ready for life's greatest adventure.

And let me encourage you that if you have dropped out of this adventure. To get back into this adventure. It would seem that out of all the apostles, John lived the longest.

And yet here in 1 John 3 verse 1, John, at this stage, an incredibly old man. This is probably around 90 AD. You can see that this old man is utterly absorbed by the love of God.

Utterly absorbed. According to this verse, this adventure consists of three stages. Exploring the love of God.

Experiencing the love of God. Expressing the love of God. First of all, exploring the love of God.

[4 : 47] The adventure of exploring the love of God. The verse begins with these words, See what kind of love. As far as John's concerned, all he's asking us to do this morning is to open our eyes and see.

Open the eyes of your mind, your body and your heart and see. Behold it. See it. Explore it. As a teenager living in Cyprus. One weekend we took a cruise to Egypt. We traveled down from Port Said to Cairo.

And then to Giza where we saw the three great pyramids. You can pull pictures of these pyramids up on Google images. You can see photographs of them in books.

But let me tell you, nothing quite prepares you for the sight of the three great pyramids of Giza. They are absolutely huge.

[5 : 50] Especially the central great pyramid of Cheops. I remember standing there in a field, looking up at these three great pyramids as a 15 year old.

My jaw was just open. Amazement. The awesomeness of one of the great seven wonders of the ancient world. There's the idea here in 1 John 3 verse 1.

See what kind of love. Standing there. Just let your jaw drop open. And be amazed at the immense magnitude and the burning ferocity and the eternal passion of the love of God the Father for you.

Do not take your eyes off it for a second. For over the last 18 months we've all been distracted by pandemics and politics. By doubts and uncertainties.

Now is the time to get the eyes of your mind and your heart and your body back to where they should always have been. On the immensity of the love of God. Are you consciously, intentionally and deliberately staring.

[7 : 00] Your jaw having dropped open. At the unconditional love of God the Father. Or are you allowing yourself. To be constantly distracted.

By today's pressing concerns. And tomorrow's pressing worries. John continues. He says, What kind of love?

See, what kind of love? He uses a rather unusual and common word. Referring to the kind or the species of love. It's almost like wide-eyed.

Even after a lifetime of exploring this love. John's still trying to classify its species. He sees all kinds of love around him every day.

The love friends have for each other. The love a man has for his wife. The love of parents for their children. And from time to time he also sees a self-sacrificial noble love.

[8 : 02] But try as he might, the love of God exceeds all these categories. It's its own species. Sui generis. Sui generis.

Sui generis. Sui generis. It will not surprise you to know that I was always an inquisitive, questioning boy. I loved to learn about plants and animals.

I loved to watch them flourishing in their habitats. I loved to turn stones over and to collect the insects I found. To look at them under a microscope and then to draw them on my sketch pad.

I clearly remember the first time I encountered liverwort. Liverwort. I was walking beside a river in the north and underneath a small waterfall among all the weeds and moss.

I saw a clump of something I'd never seen before. Its leaves looked like well-formed jelly. And they felt like wet leather. Not only had I never seen this plant before, but this plant looked like no other plant I had ever seen before.

[9 : 11] Amazed at its appearance and texture, I thought to myself, What species of plant is this? Of what genus? What kind of plant is this?

I'd seen thousands of different kinds of plants from vast trees to tiny flowers. I had never seen anything quite like liverwort before. But now that I know what it is, I see it everywhere.

Yes, there is even some growing in the courtyard just below the east windows of this sanctuary. You'll all be rushing out there after the service.

Liverwort looks like and feels like nothing you have ever encountered before. It is a species all on its own. And that's what John is inviting us to when he invites us to explore what kind of love the Father has given us.

It exceeds all categorization. It's its own species. To what can we compare it? Wrap up the love of a mother for her suckling child with the love of a husband for his new wife.

[10 : 24] With the love of the closest of friends. With the love of the noblest of self-sacrifices. Wrap them all up in a bundle. And multiply them over and over and over and over again.

Until the vastness of this church cannot contain all the bundles. You're still falling pitifully short of how much God the Father loves you.

At the highest point on planet earth. The summit of Everest. With the deepest point on planet earth. The Marianas Trench.

The Philippines. Add them together. Multiply them by a million. Until you've gone to the moon. And 10,000 times beyond that.

And you're still pitifully short. Of God's love for us. I used this illustration before. So it will be familiar to some of you at least.

[11 : 23] A few years ago we visited the ruins of St Andrew's Cathedral. There are many wells dug into the ground. Of the ruins. And like many other people.

I took a penny out of my pocket. These were the days before contactless. We all had money in our pockets. And I dropped a penny into the well. And I listened carefully to hear.

That penny hit the bottom of the well. To figure out how deep that well was. If God's love was a well. How long would it take for the penny to hit the bottom?

If God's love was a well. How long would it take a penny to hit the bottom? A minute? A month? A century?

A million years? Yes, a million years and a million times a million years. And still the penny would not have touched or reached the bottom of the well.

[12 : 24] These three comparisons. They illustrate for us a tiny insignificant way. How vast the love of God is.

And you can spend a lifetime of exploring that love. And yet you know it's not the quantity of God's love. John is really drawing our attention to here.

It's the quality of God's love. It's a love quite unlike anything you have ever seen or will ever see. It is its own unique species.

It is in a class of its own. It requires an altogether different taxonomic system to describe it. It is so very different.

Like the great pyramid of Cheops up against a little Lego pyramid. Like a liverwort compared to a weed.

[13 : 22] There is nothing like it in the human world. It leaves you wondering to yourself what kind of love is this? Well, the best place we see it is on the cross.

Where God the Father demonstrated his love for us. In that while we were yet sinners, his son Christ died for us. You see, one of the things which makes God's love so unique.

Is the us to whom God has given this love. It is really easy to love the lovable. Most of you know my wife.

She's downstairs with a Sunday school. She can't hear what I'm saying. It is really easy to love Kathimer because she is so lovable. Look at your heroes.

You love them because they are lovable. But to love the unlovable. To love sinners like us. Rebels who would wish God out of existence if we could.

[14 : 27] To love us takes a kind of love we only see in the cross of Christ.

Where in love he stretched out his arms to embrace a world lost in sin. Yes, even those who were mocking him and torturing him and crucifying him.

Yes, he loved them also. This love is its own species. It is greater and more magnificent of anything of which we are capable. And in this verse John is saying to us, See it for yourself.

Prepare yourself for the adventure of exploring its dimensions. Prepare yourself for the adventure. Dig deep into the word of God.

Especially the four gospels. Pray through the scripture. And relate them to the situations you are facing in your daily life. Explore the dimensions of the love of God.

[15 : 29] You will find it to be deeper and higher and wider than you can possibly imagine. And then when you think you have seen it all. When you are an impossibly old man like John was.

You realize to yourself. Ah, but I've but barely dipped my toes. Into the ocean of the love God has for me. It is the real you.

God loves. Not the person you pretend to be. Not the person you would like to be. But the real you God loves.

The petulant you. The lonely, confused, ashamed, guilty, hurting, insecure you.

God loves. This you. This is true adventure. Exploring that love. Second.

[16 : 34] We have the experience. The adventure of the experience of the love of God. The adventure of experiencing the love of God. Look at the verse with me.

John continues inviting us deeper into the adventure of the love of God. He says, See what kind of love the Father has given to us.

It's that word given which draws our attention. It's variously translated by other Bible translations as bestowed or lavished. But its root meaning is to give.

God has given us this love. Again, it's to us. Not the nice pretend us. But to the us we know deep down we are.

Dr. Jekyll might cut a fine figure in the streets of Edinburgh. But it's the murderous Mr. Hyde God truly loves. God has given this love to the most undeserving.

[17 : 38] To the most unlovable. To us. That he might display the majesty of his grace. God has given us this love.

It's his gift. It's free of charge. It cost him dearly. But to us he gives freely. It is not a reward for the worthy.

It is a gift for the unworthy. You know sometimes we give money to beggars on the street. Do they deserve what we give them? No.

Not at all. And yet they earn the money we give them nonetheless. They earn it. Because our charity makes us feel good about ourselves.

These beggars earn their money by making us feel good. When we give them our pennies. But such self-seeking never entered into the heart of God.

[18 : 41] He gives us such love. Not to make him feel good about himself. Not for any selfish reason whatsoever. He gives us such love freely.

And with no cost to us at all. In the 60s they all talked about free love. There is no such thing as free love anywhere. There is always a selfish element to human love.

Always. A feel good factor. But not with God. That is one reason his love stands alone. As its own species.

He gives with no ulterior selfish motive at all. No one else loves you like God the Father does. No one so freely.

So unconditionally. So adventureously. So beautifully. So unselfishly. So extravagantly. Yes. Yes. The you who is unlovable.

[19 : 45] The you who you even struggle to like. God loves you this way. But there is more and so much more. For this is a love which is given to us.

It is not merely demonstrated to us in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is as far as it goes for many people who call themselves Christian. That the love of God is something we see demonstrated.

It is something outside us. Something objective. Something entirely other to us as it were. But that is not John's idea. No not at all. It is a love given to us.

It is bestowed. It is imparted to us. It goes from being something out there to something in here. It goes from something we see already demonstrated to something we ourselves can experience.

John who along with his younger contemporary the apostle Paul wants us not merely to explore the love of God. John wants us to experience it for ourselves.

[20 : 53] To go from being external to being internal. Paul talked about how the most important goal in his life was to know Christ.

Not just to know about Christ. But to really know Christ. How important it is for us as Christians living on the roller coaster of today's world.

To have Jesus not just with us. But in us. Not just to know him from what we read in books about him.

Or from second hand stories other people have told us. But to experience his loving hand daily guiding us. And providing us.

Providing for us. And you know this is an astonishing truth. Astonishing. That the measureless love of God. This mysterious love which goes beyond all calculation.

[22 : 00] Is his gift of grace to us. The Puritan divines who we may agree walked closely with God. They talked about this as the experimental knowledge of Christ.

The experimental knowledge of Christ. Not just that we intellectually know the truth about the love of God. But that it fills our hearts and overflows into every area of who we are.

That when as the Father's love for us begins as fact. It moves into feeling. It becomes emotive and effective for us.

That what the mind knows. Softens and changes our hearts. Though the expedition may begin with an exploration into the love of God.

It truly becomes an adventure as we move from exploration to experience. As God's love does not just impact our minds but also our hearts.

[23 : 03] It begins to raise our sense of self-esteem. Our sense of worth. As it fills us with gospel meaning and security. The adventure of your lifetime is the experience of the love of God.

As Paul would say in another part. Shed abroad in our hearts. Such love given to us. The love of God the Father for his beloved son.

The love of the cross. The altogether unique love of God for you. The real you. And you're saying to me today. Right you sold me on it.

How can I experience this love for myself? I know it. I know it. But I don't experience it. To me it's a fact.

But it's no feeling. This is a common problem. And there is no one answer. However at least part of it consists in this.

[24 : 05] Drive home the truth of the cross of Christ. Deep into your hearts and minds. Let the cross be front and center.

Of the way you think. And the way you see. See everything in life from the perspective. Of the cross. Remembering the timeless words of Martin Luther.

Crux probat omnia. The cross is the test of everything. See that cross in front of your mind's eye. See the Father giving his son for you.

You see the Father loving you. You see it. You believe it. You begin to feel it. It's true adventure. Experiencing God's love.

And then thirdly and lastly and briefly. The adventure of exploring the love of God. Of experiencing the love of God. And then thirdly the adventure of expressing the love of God.

[25 : 11] Expressing the love of God. See what kind of love the Father has given to us. That we should be called children of God. And that is what we are. The Christian doctrine of adoption.

Is the high point of salvation. That we to whom God has given his love. We selfish, mortal and sinful human beings. Should become the children of God.

We thank God for the forgiveness of our sins. We thank God for the newness of our hearts. But there are simply not enough words. In the languages of men and of angels.

Combined to do justice to the glory of our adoption. As his beloved sons and daughters. Throughout this book of 1 John.

The apostle is applying. Carefully applying the Christian doctrine. Of adoption. Into the context of a troubled church. Filled with tense relationships. And he's asking the question.

[26 : 13] How do we as children of God. Relate to one another. Especially to those with whom we might naturally struggle. How can we live out our sonship.

It will come as no surprise to you. To learn that John applies our adoption. As God's children. In the context of loving one another. For example in 1 John 3 verse 10.

We read these words. By this it is evident who are the children of God. And who are the children of the devil. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God.

Nor is the one who does not love his brother. In other words. Children of God. Love fellow children of God. It's a family love.

And it's a family love. First and foremost. Because it's the love of our father for us. That majestic love. Which goes beyond all measurement and calculation. Which has in Christ Jesus been given to us.

[27 : 19] That's our father's character. That's his trait. And if we're his children. If we've been born of him. If he is our father. And has given us his love.

Then we are to evidence that. In expressing it in our love. For one another. That's what it means. In this context. To be God's child.

It's not so much a theological construct. Or statement. As it is an ethical statement. You must love other Christians. Love other children of God.

The way God the father has loved you. And yes. They may be very hard to love. Love. I was talking with someone beforehand. About the deceptiveness of another Christian.

And how much it hurts. Oh. That person's hard to love. But so am I. And God loved me. The Christian who does not extend.

[28 : 18] The love of God the father. To another Christian. Is guilty of forgetting. The kind of love. That he's been loved with. By God the father. That's a warning for us all.

Answer me this question. Every one of us here. In what ways. Are you expressing. The extraordinary love. God has given you. In what ways. Are you sacrificing yourself. For the sake of other Christians.

Even as Christ. Christ. Sacrificed himself. For you. I would argue. From observation. That. Whether. As many may have started. Out. On the adventure. Of being loved. By God. There are many. Who have not even. Begun. To start out.

[29 : 12] On the adventure. Of expressing. The love of God. And so. Once again. I ask the question. In what ways. Are you expressing. The extraordinary. Love.

Of God. You are both. Exploring for yourself. And experiencing. For yourself. As we exit. The COVID pandemic. There are. Hundreds of ways.

That you can express. That love. Among your fellow. Christians. Here in Glasgow City. Free Church. Among your fellow. Family. Members.

Your brothers. And sisters. In Christ. And I'm not saying. It's easy. To express. That love. You try. To express. That love. And sometimes.

It will be unwelcome. And it will be. Misunderstood. But all the time. Remember something. How often. Did you misunderstand. And reject. God's love. In Christ. Before finally.

[30 : 07] His passion. Broke through. And overcame. Your objections. You know. You don't have to be. A brilliant.

Eccentric. Old Testament. Professor. To have a thing. For roller coasters. I don't really. But many do. You don't have to be. A super Christian. To go on the adventure.

Of a lifetime. To explore. To experience. To express. The love of God. For you in Christ. This love. That goes beyond. All human measurement.

And description. It just have to be you. See it. Enjoy it.

Bask in it. Experience it. Extend it to others. This surely. Is the adventure. Of a lifetime.

[31 : 02] Let us pray. Father. Let us pray. Father. Forgive us.

For. Our harsh thoughts. Of you. For in your word. Far more often. Than love. Being attributed. To Jesus. It is attributed.

To you. To you. God. The father. Demonstrated. His love for us. In this. God the Father so loved the world God the Father has given us this love Lord we ask that you would give us the daring and yes even the daring do to begin this adventure of exploring your love experiencing it and expressing it all to begin back here at the cross of Jesus Christ where through faith in him we are justified and adopted as your children we ask these things in Jesus Christ Amen