

The World's Greatest Love Story

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Preacher: Pastor David

[0:00] Good morning. This morning, in honor of our Chinese friends, I would like to start with a Chinese story.

! It's the story of Liang Shanbo yu Juyingtai. Now, in English, you can call it the story of the butterfly lovers.

Juyingtai, who let's call Julie, okay? Julie was the only daughter of a wealthy family.

And at that time, young women were not encouraged to take up scholarly pursuits. But Julie convinces her father to let her go to school disguised as a young man.

And so, Julie, on her way to school, which was pretty far from her home, meets a young man along the way, Liang Shanbo.

[1:08] Let's call him Leon, okay? So, Julie meets Leon, and they begin to talk. And they find out they're going to be classmates.

And so, they talk as they walk along the way. And very quickly, their hearts are drawn to each other. They actually stop on the way and take an oath of brotherhood.

For three years, Julie and Leon study together. Now, Leon was very focused on his studies.

And so, he doesn't even notice that Julie is a young lady. Julie, though, very soon finds herself falling in love with Leon.

Then, suddenly, one day, she gets a letter. Julie gets a letter from her father saying she must come home right away.

[2:14] And so, she has no choice but to pack everything up and say goodbye to Leon. But she's already decided in her heart that she loves him and wants to be with him forever.

Now, Leon, being the good friend he is, decides to walk about 18 miles with Julie to see her off. All along the way, Julie is trying to subtly reveal to Leon that she's a young lady. But Leon doesn't pick up on any of the clues.

So, finally, her last effort, as they're about to part, is she says, Leon, when you finish school, come visit me and I will be a matchmaker and set you up with my sister.

Well, Leon's very excited because he thinks, well, he'll get a wife and his close friend. And they can be family. So, about a year passes until Leon's finally able to come and visit Julie.

[3:29] But when he arrives, Julie quickly runs out and confesses to him, It's me. I'm really a woman. Well, Leon suddenly is kind of overwhelmed with a sense of love for her.

And he thinks, this is the best possibility. And they make this commitment to each other, kind of like until death do us part. And so, they hurry quickly to Julie's father so that Leon can ask for her hand in marriage.

Unfortunately, their excitement is very short-lived because Julie's father reveals to both of them that he has already promised her in marriage to a wealthy merchant.

Leon is depressed and brokenhearted. He goes home and over time his health gets worse and finally he dies from a broken heart.

And Julie agrees to marry the wealthy merchant. But there's one condition. She will only marry him if her wedding processional can pass by Leon's grave.

[4:48] And so, it's agreed to. And on the day of her wedding, her wedding processional is passing by Leon's grave. When suddenly, there's a strong wind that causes them to stop.

And Julie sees her chance. She runs from the wedding party to Leon's grave. And she falls down and begs that the grave would open up. And miraculously, the grave splits open.

Without a second thought, Julie throws herself into the grave. And all of the wedding party runs up and looks into the grave. And all they see is Leon and Julie's spirits emerge as a pair of butterflies. To fly off and be together, never to be separated again. Isn't it interesting how every culture has its own set of love stories?

I'm sure probably none of you had heard that story before. But all of you have, right? You know, every culture has love stories.

[6:01] And often, there are love stories that are about sacrificial love or tragic things happening. But our hearts are so easily caught up in the story that we really don't care if it makes sense or if it's impossible.

It doesn't matter to us if it's immoral or foolish. Our hearts are so moved that we quickly find some beauty in the story. You guys know that.

You can think about plenty of stories. Whether it's like Mark Anthony and Cleopatra or Romeo and Juliet. The hunchback of Notre Dame.

Sir Lancelot, Queen Guinevere. Even more modern, like Jack and Rose from the Titanic, right? You see, there's just something in us that connects with these love stories.

And I think it's because in all of our hearts, we desire to be loved that way. To find someone that will love us sacrificially.

[7:10] Someone that is willing to give up everything, even life itself, because they love us so much. This morning, we're going to talk about the world's greatest love story.

And the good news is, it's true. We're looking at 1 John chapter 4, verses 7 through 12.

In 2024, verse 24, verse 24, verse 24, verse 24.

4, 7 through 12. It says, Beloved, let us love one another. For love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

[8:34] In this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you have written us a love story, that you have shown us your love.

Father, I ask that you would open our hearts and our minds to see the beauty of your word, to see the beauty of this love story before us, and that our hearts would be caught, and that we would rejoice in the fact that we are loved by you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. We're going to look at this love story, and on the back of your bulletin, you can take notes if you want to. It might help.

[9:56] The first thing we're going to look at is the characters in this love story. The characters in this love story. And the main character you'll see very quickly is God.

If you read that passage, it's a huge number of times that we see the word God. If you count up all the pronouns and everything, I think it's about 13 times.

God is the main character, and if you include his son, it's even more than that. And notice what we learn in these verses about God.

It tells us God is the source of love. In verse 7, we see it says love is from God.

God is the source of love. It also tells us something even bigger than that. That God is love.

[11:01] In verse 8, God is love. Now, I think we should stop for a minute and clarify. There really are two kinds of love.

There are two kinds of love. The first is self-centered love. Now, think about it. We say, I love pizza. Or, I love sleeping. I love my job. Even, I love you. But think about when you say that, what does it really mean?

It means, I really enjoy eating pizza. I really like the way sleeping makes me feel.

I find my job is very satisfying. Or, I like my colleagues. Or, it pays me a lot of money. And, even when we say, I love you, much of the time, what we really mean is, I love the way you make me

feel.

[12:17] You see, at the center of all of those uses of love is myself. It's all about me. Right?

Doe, but doe. Doe. But, there's a second kind of love. It's God-centered love. It's God-centered love.

And, if we looked at this in the original language, which is Greek, it was written in Greek, we would see the word here is agape.

That's the Greek word used for love. Agape. Agape. And, agape is a very special word for Bible writers. They used the word agape to talk about the love that God has.

It's a love that's focused on others, not on self. Probably the best description we find of that kind of love is in 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4 through 8.

[13:27] 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4 through 8.

It says, And, when we're talking about love today, that's the kind of love we're talking about. A God-centered love. A love that is not focused on me, and what do I get, but a love that is focused on others, and on doing whatever is best for others, no matter what the cost.

We also see about God in verses 10 and 11, that God loves us. Or, we see in 10 through 12, that God desires an intimate relationship with us.

But God's not the only character in this story. Let's look at the secondary characters. That would be you and me. You and me.

[15:15] Notice it talks a lot in this verse about you or us or we. And it shows us several things that are important. We see one, we need help loving.

We need help loving. In verses 7 and 8, it tells us God is the source of love, and that we can only love this way if we get that love from God.

We can't love that way on our own. It also shows us that we need help living. In verse 9, Notice it talks about that God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

We need help living. We can't even live right on our own. Notice in verse 10, it says, We don't love God.

We don't love God. Verse 10, In this is love, not that we loved God. Let's look at another passage in Romans chapter 3.

[16:25] Romans chapter 3, verses 10 through 18. Romans 3, 10 through 18.

And it says, As the scriptures say, No one is righteous, not even one. No one is truly wise.

No one is seeking God. All have turned away. All have become useless. No one does good, not a single one. Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave.

Their tongues are filled with lies. Snake venom drips from their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. They rush to commit murder.

Destruction and misery always follow them. They don't know where to find peace, for they have no fear of God at all. You see, we don't love God.

[17:34] We also see, in verse 10, that we have sin that has separated us from God. We have sin that has separated us from God.

It says, But God loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Now, propitiation is a big word.

But what it basically means is that we have done something wrong and caused someone to be angry. And something must be done to take away that anger and restore our relationship, to fix our guanxi.

Let's look at Romans chapter 1, verses 18 through 32. It says, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

[19:06] So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking.

And their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever.

For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions, for their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature. And the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manners of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.

[20:33] They're full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They're gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.

So our sin has separated us from God. So that's the characters. We have God and his son. He is the source of love.

He is love. He wants to pour that love out and be in relationship with us. And we have us. We are in need of help loving, of help living.

We are not lovers of God and our sin has separated us from him. Now let's talk about the plot of the story. The plot of this love story is summarized in verses 9 through 10.

[21:48] 9 through 10, where it says, In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only son into the world so we might live through him.

In this is love, not that we've loved God, but he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. The truth is, even in these two verses, we find probably one of the most clear summaries of the entire Bible.

In those two verses, all of the essence of God's love story to us is there. Very short, very quick, but it's all there.

The best way to understand God's love story is to read the whole book. It will take us 80 hours.

Let's begin. Since we don't have 80 hours, I thought the best thing I could do is to tell you a story. A story that will give you a little more summary of God's love story to us. It's the story of the great emperor.

[23:01] There was a great and glorious emperor, Shang Di, who ruled over a perfect and wonderful kingdom. He provided everything his people needed.

He treated them like they were all his own children. Even the laws that he had were written for the good of the people. However, the people chose to be selfish.

They wanted more than perfection. You see, they believed in themselves, and they thought they should be able to be their own emperor. They wanted to do whatever they wanted, anytime they wanted.

Well, the emperor told them, if you want to live this way, it's not good for you, and you'll have to leave the kingdom. So the rebellious people left. They moved out to the place where the kingdom dumped all of its trash and lived on a giant pile of trash.

And without the emperor to lovingly rule over them, the people began to use each other. They would lie to each other and steal from each other. They actually would find ways to hurt each other in any way imagined.

[24:17] And not only that, but living on the trash pile caused them to get sicknesses and diseases and many other problems started.

The emperor could see all of this from his palace. Even though he was angry because of their actions, he still loved them and cared for him.

He would send out food, water, medicine, and other things that they needed. And even though the people should have been thankful for all the emperor was doing, they ignored him.

Instead, they chose new rulers, new leaders, and they thanked these new leaders and they worshipped these new leaders even for the very things that the emperor was sending to them.

The way that the people lived dishonored and shamed the emperor. And the emperor would send out workers from the palace to remind the people of all the good the emperor offered them, to challenge them, to turn away from their selfish living, and to restore their relationship with the emperor, to return to his kingdom.

[25:35] Yet, every time one of the emperor's people came out to the trash people, the trash people would grab them and torture them and kill them. One day, the emperor's only son, the prince, came to him and said, Father, I know that you love these people, even though they turned away from you.

They've lived selfish, terrible lives. They've brought shame on you and your kingdom. I know that you love them. So, I want to go out and live with them.

I will spend my life teaching them the truths about you and your love that they have forgotten. And in the end, I will take the punishment that they deserve for their actions so that they can be restored to our kingdom.

Even though the emperor loved his son, more than can be described, more than can be described, he honored his son's desire and let him go to live among the trash people.

Every day, the emperor would watch from the palace as his son lived among the trash people. He watched as the prince would love them and care for them and teach them about the emperor's kingdom.

[26:57] And every day that passed, more and more of the trash people became sorry for the way they had treated the emperor, how they had dishonored him and brought shame upon themselves and their kingdom and wanted to change how they were living.

However, the trash people's hearts were changing and the leaders saw that. They began to hate the prince even more than they hated the emperor.

And as their hatred grew, they began to plan how they would destroy the prince, the emperor's precious son. The emperor watched all of these things happen day by day.

And then at the perfect moment, the emperor went to the trash pile. Everyone gathered together and the emperor said to them, I am a good, honest, righteous, and just emperor.

Shame and dishonor has been brought upon me and my kingdom by your actions. You must all be justly punished for your crimes. At this, the prince stepped forward and said, Father, I am willing to take the punishment for these people.

[28:23] The emperor asked, Who will hold the prince while he is punished? Well, with great excitement, all the leaders of the trash pile rushed forward and grabbed the prince.

They stripped him of his royal coat and forced him to his knees. The emperor took out a powerful whip and began to whip the prince.

And each strike sounded like thunder. Every time he would whip the prince, the emperor would call out one of the names of the people on the trash pile and say, Your crimes have been paid for.

This went on for the longest time. David Bout, Your crimes have been paid for. Titus Mahaffey, Your crimes have been paid for.

Mark Rugsager, Your crimes have been paid for. Blake Murphy, Your crimes have been paid for. Huang Dandan, Your crimes have been paid for.

[29:22] Lan Yi, Your crimes have been paid for. Liu Chunya, Your crimes have been paid for. Name after name, lash after lash, the blood of the prince filled the street.

No one really knew how long it lasted. All they remembered was the moment they heard their name. the moment they heard their name and that their crimes have been paid for.

At that moment, their hard hearts melted within them. When the emperor was finished and the prince was dead, the emperor cried out, All of you that have had your crimes paid for, I forgive you and you may return to the kingdom and live as my children once again.

Well, large people, large groups of people immediately ran from the trash pile into the kingdom and their lives were completely changed. They became new people and the new people's hearts were so overflowing with the love they'd received from the emperor that they began to love those around them even more than they loved themselves.

They even found themselves loving the people that were still on the trash pile. And so they would go out and take care of them and tell them about all of the love they'd received from the emperor and invite them to come back and be one of the emperor's children too.

[30:53] As the trash people saw the way the new people loved each other and loved them, more and more of them wanted to become children of the emperor. After several days, the emperor showed he was even more glorious and powerful than the people realized.

The emperor gave the prince life again. All of the people that had returned to the kingdom celebrated the prince's return, his resurrection. And their hearts were filled with even more love because of what the prince had done for them.

The prince continued to lead the people to go out to the trash pile and to share the good news with all who would listen. and the story continues even today.

You see, the best news about the world's greatest love story is that it's continuing. It's a continuing story. And everyone has a chapter in this story.

Everyone in this room, everyone in the world, everyone that's ever lived has a chapter in the world's greatest love story. Each of us is responsible for our own chapter.

[32:09] The question is, will you choose a life of self-centered love? Will you choose to keep living on the trash pile, letting your life be filled with selfish love where every relationship, every decision, every action is focused on your own comfort and pleasure?

always looking for something to satisfy you in your job or your relationships, your family, but never finding it.

Forever living with that feeling that there's something more that you are missing. Or will you accept a life of God-centered love?

Will you accept a life of God-centered love? Are you willing to hear the truth about God? Realize the truth of how you have been living a self-centered life that dishonors and shames God and accept the love that Jesus has shown to you in paying for your sin?

Will you turn away from self-centered living on the trash pile outside of God's kingdom? Are you willing to let God-centered love rule your life and make you a new person?

[33:29] If you're willing, if you're willing to accept God's love, there are such beautiful results. The results of accepting God's love are this.

One, we have an intimate relationship with God as our Father. Look at 1 John 4 verse 12. It says, No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God abides in us.

God abides in us. God lives in us. God becomes an intimate part of our lives. He is our Father.

We are His children. So if you accept God's love, you'll have an intimate relationship with Him. But the second result is we will truly love one another.

When we accept God-centered love, our hearts are changed so that we can love each other as we should. No longer being selfish in our thoughts.

[34:40] What do I get? How does it make me feel? Why is this good for me? But our hearts are changed so that we can love others and we can think most about them.

What's best for them? How can I serve them? How can I help them? The third benefit is if we accept God's love, the world will see God through our true love for one another.

The world will see God through our true love for one another. Again, in verse 12, it talks about how no one has seen God, but if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. It's made perfect, it's made complete, and the world will see it. In John chapter 13, verses 34 and 35, Jesus tells us that by this all people will know you're my disciples if you have love for one another.

So we have a responsibility. We decide how do we want the chapter of our lives in this great love story to look.

[35:52] How is it you will let your story end? Will it be a story of self-centered love or God-centered love? Today, I encourage you to choose wisely.

Let's pray. Amen.