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BELOVED!

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, the Spirit descended on Him like a dove, and a voice spoke from heaven: *You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* That is the way Mark and Luke reported this amazing experience. (Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22). Matthew reports it differently. *Suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* (Matt. 3:17) In the first report, God the Father spoke directly to His Son; in the second, God spoke to John the Baptist and possibly to the crowd that was gathered for baptism. So is this a contradiction? Of course not. God speaks different words to different people at the same time all the time. The point is that God's Son was beloved by His Father, and the Father told Him directly and also announced it to the whole world. "This is my Boy, and Oh, how precious He is to me! My dear Son, I love you so much, and I am so pleased with you!" This was before Jesus healed anyone or saved anyone or died on the cross.

That's the way you and I feel about our children. We love them wholeheartedly, not because of what they do or don't do, but because they are our children. And God has set an example for us: we need to tell our kids how much we love them, and we need to tell other people how proud we are of our children. Also, of course, we need to regularly tell our wife or husband how much we love her or him. An old farmer went to his wife's funeral. He said to the country preacher: "Lizzie and I were married for 62 years. She was the most wonderful wife any man could have, and she was a wonderful mother to our children. I loved her so much that at times I could hardly keep from telling her." Well, it wouldn't hurt anything to tell your spouse and your kids how much you love them now before you die or before they die.

Do you realize that God the Father loves you and me just the same as He does His Son? It is incomprehensible, but that is what Jesus said at the Last Supper (John 17:23) This shouldn't surprise us, for we know that God loves us so much that He sent His Son to die on a cross for us. You are beloved by God! Wow! If you receive a healing, you should not say, "Oh, this proves that God loves me." What about your friend down the hall in the hospital that was not healed? Does God not love her? No, the Cross proves that God loves you whether you are healed or not. The Cross proves God's love whether you keep your job or not, whether your marriage is saved or not, whether your kids grow up and make your heart swell with pride or break your heart. God's love for you and me is settled.

How I thank God that in this world where so much news is bleak, depressing, and frightening, we can know we are loved with an everlasting love. We are beloved! I can't understand why so many terrible things are happening to people I deeply care about. If I dwell on those things I sink like a stone in a well. So I must decide to trust God, to put them in His hands. I can't carry them, but He can. And I must resist that voice that comes to me and says, "If God really loved you, He would do thus and so. He would heal and deliver you and those you love." No, God's love for me, and for you, is not in question. The Cross forever settles that question. And ultimately God's character will be vindicated.

On some days you will be absolutely sure that God loves you. On other days, maybe because of your lousy performance, or for some reason unknown to you, you will feel that God is a million miles away, that He is totally indifferent or even disgusted with you. May I remind you that God knew what He was getting when He chose you. And He did choose you, according to Ephesians 1:4. *He chose us in Him (Christ) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.* God did not choose us because we were good and holy, but He chose us to be good and holy. We certainly can't be good or holy without His help, so He has chosen to enable us by His grace, day by day, not only to act more like Jesus but to be more like Jesus. Needless to say, we falter and fall on our faces more often than not, but like the parent of a toddler, he is ever ready to pick us up, dust us off, and encourage us to keep on. It is important that with His help we fall forward and not fall back. Right?

Immediately after Jesus' experience at the Jordan River, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He was tempted for forty days by the devil. (Matt. 4:1) The devil said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." Ah ha! Do you see what the devil said and what he did not say? His first word was "If. If you are the Son of God." Satan was calling into question Jesus' relationship with His Father. Note also that he deleted something: God had just said, "You are my beloved Son." Satan left out the word, "beloved." He wanted Jesus to forget that word. Satan also wants you and me to forget that word. He does not want you to believe that you are a son or daughter of God. (Have you

ever doubted your salvation?) And he absolutely does not want you to believe that you are beloved. A moment ago when I said that God loves you as much as He does His Son, did you think, "Well, that is not really true. That is surely not what the Bible means." It is terrible how we resist accepting the good news that God loves us like that.

When you mess up and say something you shouldn't have said or do something crumby, do you think, "God must surely realize what an inconsistent jerk I am. He couldn't possibly love me today." (Am I the only one who has thoughts like that?) Yes, God knows who and what we are. "He knows we are but dust." But He loves us with an "everlasting love." That means His love just won't quit.

During the Last Supper, Simon Peter started boasting about how much he loved Jesus. He said, "I won't ever let you down, Jesus. Why, even if I have to go to prison or die with you, you can count on my love for you." We know what happened. Exactly what Jesus said would happen. Before a rooster crowed, Peter denied Jesus three times. He even started cursing to convince the crowd that he wasn't one of Jesus' disciples. (By the way, that is a good strategy to remember. If you want to convince people that you are not a Jesus-follower, just let them hear you cursing and using vile, filthy language. Mission accomplished!)

Another disciple at the Last Supper is called "The disciple whom Jesus loved." I used to wonder if Jesus had favorites, but then I realized that the only place those words are used about John is in the Gospel of John. John wrote it about himself! Remember that during the crucifixion, when all the other disciples were in hiding, John was standing at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother. **It is not our love for the Lord that keeps us steady, it is His love for us.** And it is true that Jesus has favorites: you are His favorite! He loves every one of His kids as if he is the only one, just like you and I love our children.

A newborn infant's eyes are kind of unfocused. They can't see very far, and their eyes are darting this way and that. What are they looking for? It has been discovered that they are looking for eyes looking back at them. When they see mother's or dad's eyes looking at them, they focus on those eyes. They know in that moment that they are not alone and that they are loved. In those times when you are discouraged, lonely, anxious, hopeless, look up. There are some eyes looking at you. They are not looking in irritation, annoyance, or disgust. They are looking at you as at a favorite child. They are looking at you in love. You are beloved.



WORLDLY CHURCHES

I just heard that the churches in Las Vegas accept poker chips from the casinos in their offerings. Gasp! They take all the chips to a central location where a certain priest separates them and returns them for credit to the different casinos. He is the chipmonk.

KEEPING ON FOR THE LONG HAUL

I have a book, Global Passion, in which each chapter is by a different missionary recounting the joys and difficulties of serving God in a foreign land. These testimonies humbly and gently relate what it really means to be committed and surrendered to the one we call Lord, and I am stabbed with a recognition of how far short I fall. Following are excerpts from a chapter by "Grace Ferguson," which is a pseudonym. She and her husband have worked in the Middle East with Operation Mobilization for over thirty years.

"The devil tries desperately to keep Christians from entering missions. If you do go, he will try to make you miserable, scare you away, wear you out and discourage you. Fellow missionaries or leaders may cause the most pain. In 1970 we graduated from college. Within three months we married and moved to the Middle East.

All of the Middle East is dusty, and living in a city of six million adds grime to the dust, so clothes need to be washed frequently. When our boys were small, every few days I had to boil up a huge pot of cloth diapers on the stove, rinse them in the bathtub, and hang them out to dry on our balcony on the fourth floor. Similarly, without regular spiritual cleansing, we will not be able to go for the long haul because of sin in our lives and broken relationships with others. In our ministry we have spent a lot of time cleaning up relations or situations for spiritual babies. We must humbly do whatever is necessary to wash away entanglements and sin in our lives and others.

A big test for missionaries concerns food. The test is to be content both with the food we have to eat and the work we need to do to have it. You won't stay long on the mission field if you continually yearn for and try to eat or have what you had at 'home.' Keep trying, tasting, and learning how to prepare and eat local food. If you don't like something the first time, maybe you will by the twentieth. Hospitality is very important in the Middle East. Honor is shown to guests by preparing the best food you can in more than ample amounts. Eating together provides opportunity for fellowship and

informal teaching of new believers. When we share the gospel, we must also share our lives. We have experienced God's supernatural provision in times of need and crisis.

Contentment has more to do with the nourishment of our spirits. If we don't know how to feed ourselves spiritually by reading, studying, and meditating on the Word of God, we will not make it for the long haul. There may be no Sunday school classes, conferences, marriage enrichment weekends, Christian camps, small groups, Christian radio and TV or even a church where God calls you to serve. But God can provide all we need for life and godliness.

Our first task is to learn the language and become as much as possible like the people we serve. Success in language is directly proportional to the time spent, and a fundamental motivator is our love for the people. Without love, we will not accomplish anything of lasting spiritual value. The motives of our heart are revealed by our reactions. Are we working to bring glory to Christ or to ourselves? After working several years in one city doing door-to-door evangelism and many activities of the local church, we were asked not to attend a certain special meeting. I wept when we were not included, but I learned an important lesson. It is God's work, not ours. Our role is to humbly work and serve where God places us, not to fret about recognition.

One thing is guaranteed if you make it for the long haul; you will become an expert at packing and unpacking suitcases. Your first goodbyes will probably be to parents and siblings with little understanding of the sacrifices both you and they will make in the years to come. Later on it will be goodbyes to grown up children. Your commitment to 'leave family and home for Christ's sake' (Matt. 19:29) will have to be remade over and over. Separation never gets easier.

Each return visit to your home country may bring a different battle. Friends will have houses, jobs, possessions and security that you will never have. Relatives may not understand why you don't quit, come home, settle down and get a *real* job. The devil will subtly suggest, 'Look what you could have, if you stayed home.' One cost of leaving your culture and adjusting to another is that you no longer completely fit or belong in your home country. We need to guard our hearts from jealousy, grumbling, discontent, and striving for something that God hasn't provided. Filling our hearts with thankfulness will keep the other things out.

In our tenth year of ministry, I became discouraged by the lack of visible fruit. Why were so few coming to faith? Why were the new believers not going on? Through the parable of the sower, God reminded me that our responsibility was to sow the seed even if the soil where we were working was rocky, hard and dry. On judgment day, God would be declared just because of our obedience to proclaim His message of salvation to a group of people who would be judged according to their response to that message. We needed to focus on what God had sent us to do.

If we choose to accept God's call, we will face pain, suffering, loss and testing. Jesus learned obedience from what He suffered, and so will we. During our first year of language study we traveled to another country at Christmas to do gospel distribution. In an obscure town with no church, we were arrested, questioned and blacklisted. On another occasion, because of evangelism in a closed country, my husband spent eight and a half months of our second year of marriage in prison with three others. I went through my first pregnancy and delivery alone. Although they were sentenced to four years in prison, God released them thirteen days after our first son was born. During a ceasefire in the Lebanese civil war, my husband and three others went to bring our things to Jordan. Their vans were stopped at gunpoint on the coastal road to Beirut, and the armed men drove away with the vans and all our furniture, clothes, and personal things, but no lives were lost.

In the summer of 1989 we participated in summer evangelism in Europe, and we took a week of family vacation in Cyprus. It was a wonderful, refreshing week. The day after we returned home, our third son went to visit a friend. A few hours later his friend phoned. Our son had been killed in a skate-board accident. Suffering has given us a heart link with Middle Eastern believers who suffer for their faith. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (1 Cor. 15:58)

During the years of our long haul, God has touched many hearts to provide our needs. Without them we would probably have been unable to go on. These beatitudes are written for them with our thanks:

- Blessed are those who remember us even though we have spent most of our lives away.
- Blessed are those who realized we were hungry or tired or needed a vacation and provided what we needed.
- Blessed are those who remembered us on our birthdays and other holidays.
- Blessed are those who supported us financially month after month, year after year.
- Blessed are those who loaned us their cars and their homes.

- Blessed are those who bought us suits, dresses, shoes and clothes for the children.
- Blessed are those who gave us medical and dental care free of charge.
- Blessed are those who bought us computers and helped us keep abreast of current technology.
- Blessed are those who prayed for us every day.
- Blessed are all those who were our fellow laborers in the Gospel.

NOTE: Let us commit ourselves to remembering, praying for, and supporting those missionaries whom God has put in our lives and on our hearts.

HOW TO BLESS YOUR ENEMIES

There are a lot of Christian seminars on subjects like "How God Wants to Make you Rich," and "Five Biblical Principles of Success," and "Six Ways God Will Give You a Zippy Marriage," and so forth, but I don't remember any seminars (or even any sermons) on how God wants to use you to bless your enemies. Am I mistaken, or didn't someone say something about that subject in the Bible? As I recall, wasn't it mentioned in a famous sermon, like The Sermon in the Cornfield, or The Sermon in the Orchard, or something like that? I looked up the subject in my concordance, and here are some verses that seem to be relevant:

- *But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.* (Matt 5:44)
- *Bless those who curse you and pray for those who spitefully use you.* (Luke 6:28)
- *Bless those who persecute you (who are cruel in their attitude toward you), bless and do not curse them.* (Ro. 12:14)

In spite of these clear injunctions in our Bible, as I minister to people, often they are unable or unwilling to forgive their enemies, much less to bless them. (Remember that our enemies are frequently those closest to us: fathers, mothers, spouses, siblings, even children.) If we are going to bless our enemies, the first step is to forgive them, so please note **the connection of the tongue to unforgiveness.**

When we have been offended or even deeply wounded, there is a temptation to talk about it. Since Satan works in darkness, I believe it is important to get our wounds out into the light by talking about them, but only to two persons: (1) First, to God (2) Second, to a mature Christian leader or friend for the purpose of receiving godly counsel. Beyond those two, we should discipline our tongue to keep silent.

One time there was a young couple with two little children in the church I pastored. They had incessant verbal battles. As soon as the latest fight was over, she would run to the phone and call her mother, sister and friends and relate to them the vicious, unkind things her husband had just said to her. They would respond sympathetically, "Oh, that brute! You poor thing! How can you put up with such a monster?" In the meantime, the husband would run to the phone and call his mother and friends and get their sympathy. They came to me for counseling, and when I learned what was going on, I said,

"STOP IT! I WON'T MINISTER TO YOU AND PRAY FOR YOU UNLESS YOU STOP TALKING, TALKING, TALKING ABOUT YOUR TERRIBLE SPOUSE. YOU WILL NEVER GET YOUR MARRIAGE HEALED UNTIL YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH!" (I am such a sweet, sensitive person that I frequently give soothing counsel like this.)

Another couple had been married 30 years and were active in the church. Much to her surprise, the husband abandoned her and ran off with her best friend, with whom he had been having an affair. To top it off, he drained their bank account of all their savings and left her penniless. The husband quickly divorced her and married the other woman. Wow! Years passed and this lady married a kind Christian man who was very good to her. She said she wanted to put the past behind her and get on with her life, but she was unable to do so. Not a day went by that she did not bring up the awful thing her ex-husband and best friend had done to her. She was miserable. She looked haggard. Her tongue was destroying any chance of happiness she might have.

A question: when you have problems, and especially when someone offends you in some way, do you run to the **throne** or to the **phone**?

If you are trying to forgive someone who hurt you, but you continue to talk about it, it is like getting a deep cut on your body, and every day you tear the scab off. It will not heal unless you leave it alone. Your family and friends may tempt you in this area. As your heart is beginning to heal, they may come around and bring up the situation and start rehashing the garbage from the past. Say, "My dear sister, I appreciate your sympathy, but I have forgiven him, and I have learned that if I

talk about it, it robs me of my peace. Haven't we been having beautiful weather lately?"

God wants to heal our wounded hearts. That is one of the things that Jesus specifically said He came to do in Luke 4:18. But He needs us to cooperate and obey Him. He will help us forgive, and He will help us control our tongue if we will but ask Him.

God Bless,

Glenn

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