

"For God so loved the world that
he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in
him may not perish
but may have eternal life."



This Is How God Loves the World
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The name Ernest Gordon may not be familiar to you,
but his story might be.

Gordon was a young British officer in the Second World War.

Years after the war had ended he wrote a memoir
entitled "Through the Valley of the Kwai"

which became the movie "Bridge Over the River Kwai."

In it he tells of how he was captured by the Japanese and held as a POW
in a slave labor camp in Southeast Asia.

Gordon describes the brutal conditions in the POW camp, where

not only were the guards inhumane towards the prisoners,

but the prisoners themselves fought each other

over food, water, a pair of shoes --

any necessity that was in short supply.

Under the barbarity and inhumane treatment of the camp

there were no allies.

It was every man for himself.

One day after a work detail,
a tool check reveals that a shovel is missing .
The Japanese officer in charge is furious.
He orders whoever took the missing shovel to return it.
When nobody in the unit budges, the officer pulls out his gun
and threatens to kill them all on the spot.
No one doubts that the officer means what he's said.
Still, no one moves,
no one takes responsibility for the stolen shovel.
Finally, one man steps forward.
The officer puts away his gun, picks up a shovel,
and beats the man to death with it.
Meanwhile, a second tool check is conducted.
This time, no shovel turns up missing.
Because there never was a missing shovel.
There was only a miscount at the first checkpoint.
The word spreads like wildfire throughout the camp;
how an innocent man was willing to make
the supreme sacrifice - to give his own life
to save the lives of all the others!
John's gospel tells the story of another sacrifice,
made in a different sort of war.
This wasn't a war between nations.
It was a battle between light and darkness.
It wasn't fought on battlefields like
Iwo Jima or Normandy,
but in the hearts of men and women.
Because, as John's Gospel tells it,
Jesus brought the Light of life into the world,

but people loved darkness more than the Light.

Sometimes, we human beings can be our own worst enemies.

We turn our backs on that which gives us life,

and gravitate towards things which harbor

the seeds of our own destruction.

Have you ever seen how a houseplant

that has been turned away from the sun

will bend itself back to face the light?

Even plants instinctively know the source of their life

and will seek out the light.

Human beings are a lot more complicated than plants.

We don't function by photosynthesis, but by free will.

There is that within us which turns away

from the Light of life that God offers,

wanting, instead, to be in control of our own lives on our terms.

From beginning to end, the Bible is God's love story for the world

and humanity's history of breaking God's heart.

So, how do you win a war where the objective

is not to see the enemy defeated,

but instead, to give them a victory that

they resist every inch of the way?

How do you win people over to the Light,

when they are prone to turning toward darkness?

This is how God chose to win this battle -

not by condemning the world for turning from the Light,

but by saving the world,

through a supreme sacrifice of love.

God's strategy is summed up in one of

the most famous verses in the Bible - John 3:16.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life."

Now, when we hear the words, "For God so loved the world"
we might hear them as an answer to the question of
"why" God gave his Son to save the world.

Like, God loved the world sooooo much,
that he gave up what was most precious
in order to win the world back to Him.

But John's gospel is notorious for speaking in language
that conveys multiple meanings;
and this is one of those places where
there may be levels of truth being communicated.

Because another valid way to hear this passage would be:

"This is "how" God loved the world,
by giving his only Son,
that all who believe in him may not perish
but have eternal life."

What we have then is not only an explanation
of loving the world as God's motivation
for sending His Son -
but how sending his Son perfectly expresses
His love for the world, through the method
God uses to save us.

Jesus himself dropped a clue to
how God loves the world through
an obscure story from the Old Testament
that Greg read for us this morning.

In this story, the Israelites are losing their faith in God

as they wander through the desert.

They are growing so dissatisfied with the way God has been leading them that they even start wondering if they weren't better off when they were slaves back in Egypt.

You could say they are turning away from the Light and embracing the dark.

One day, their camp gets overrun with poisonous snakes.

As the snakebite casualties begin to mount, the people turn to their leader - Moses - to do something.

Moses prays to God and God responds with what seems like a strange solution to the problem.

God tells Moses to create a bronze image of the very thing that was plaguing the Israelites - a serpent - and to lift this bronze serpent up on a pole.

When the people who were snakebit looked upon the serpent on a pole they were healed.

Which sounds like magic.

But, what it was, was Faith.

Here's how the snake on a pole thing worked.

The snake problem was a direct consequence of the people's disobedience.

It was also a problem that the people couldn't solve themselves.

When the people looked at the bronze snake on the pole they were convicted of their turning their backs on God.

Of the need for God which they tried to deny..

But, the snake on the pole also made them aware of God's grace;

God's willingness to heal and deliver them.

So it provided an opportunity for repentance,

so that those who seized the opportunity God presented them

did not perish, but lived.

Jesus said, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Jesus drew a connection between the way
God loved the Israelites in the wilderness,
by granting them life when they saw God's power to save
present in a serpent raised on a pole;
and the way God loves the whole world,
by giving eternal life to anyone who sees the same power
in God's Son when he was lifted up on a cross.

All the long history of humanity's turning
from the Light to the darkness
was focused with laser- like precision
on the cross where God's Son was crucified.
Yet, instead of the cross being the place
where God condemned the world,
it became the place where God loved the world by saving it.

What the snake on a pole
and the Savior on the cross
had in common was that they both exposed
the human capacity for rejecting God.
But they both also revealed the capacity of God to forgive.

The difference between life and death
rested on the human acceptance or rejection of God's grace.

In the Old Testament story, the obvious human need
is to be saved from death by snakebite.

But the real problem isn't snakes.

It's that the people were in a state of rebellion

against God's authority in their lives.

God's solution was the bronze serpent on the pole.

The response of the people, if they wanted to live was to believe that they could be healed through the power of God in the serpent on the pole.

In other words, to turn back to God and accept God's forgiveness and reconciliation.

In John 3:16 we find the same dynamic at work.

It says, For God so loved the world - even when the world turned their backs on God and pursued darkness -

God so loved the world, that God gave his only Son -

which according to Jesus would mean his being lifted up on a cross.

Notice that God did not send his Son to condemn the world.

God sent his Son to save the world.

Coming in the form of Jesus to share in our humanity and even to suffer death on a cross - that is God's answer to human rebellion against God.

God does not sit back and wait for us to find a will or a way to straighten ourselves out.

God takes the initiative and just asks us to place our faith in what He has done for us.

But faith is more than believing something to be true with our intellect alone.

It is more like trusting in that truth with our very lives.

It's the difference between just believing
the earth is round and not flat,
and being willing to set sail in a ship,
confident that you won't fall off the edge of the world.

Everyone who believes in what Jesus did for them that way
has eternal life.

But, "eternal life" is not simply about life after death.

It is a transformation in the quality of life we live in the present.

Grace does more than confirm our reservations in Heaven after we die.

Grace changes the way we live this life, here and now.

Which reminds me...

there is more to that story of the POWs
in the camp on the River Kwai.

The news that an innocent man had willingly sacrificed his life
so that the rest of them could live,
had a profound effect on the whole prison population.

From that day forward,
the men who had been only looking out for themselves,
began to treat each other like brothers.

When the victorious Allies finally liberated the camp,
they were amazed that the survivors,
who had been so badly mistreated,
were even able to offer forgiveness
for their former captors.

When we appreciate the price Jesus paid
for us to be reconciled to God,
our daily lives can reflect that appreciation in ways that
not only turns us towards the light,
but that offers that Light to others.

You and I were created for a way of life
that is turned away from darkness and towards the Light.

A life where you and I become participants
in how God loves the world.

This is how God loved the world.

He sent his only Son,
to save us from ourselves,
to restore us to the way of living that we were created for;
a way of life towards which we all, in one way or another,
turn our backs.

Our goal this Lent, is to move in the direction of loving God
more whole-heartedly than we are.

Not out of fear of punishment,
but as a response to God's wholehearted love to us,
and to the whole world.

The whole-hearted,
holding - nothing - back,
love of the cross.

Because grace is more than something we receive.

It is something we give away.

And this is how God loves the world.

By sending Jesus, who when he was lifted up,
rewarded us with eternal life.

And this is how God goes on loving the world.

Through lives that have been transformed by His love,
so that they share it with others.

No, you may not be familiar with Ernest Gordon's name.

But you are familiar with his story.

Because it is the story of every person

who can testify to the power of God's sacrificial love,
to not only save lives,
but to transform them.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, we thank you for all the ways you demonstrate your love for us. And especially for loving us, and all your world, so much that you sent your Son to be our Savior. Amen.