



≡ Chapter Three ≡

# Because He First Loved Us

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

1 JOHN 3:1-3

WHEN I WAS a kid growing up in Tyler, Texas, we went to church. I mean we *really* went to church. At the age of five, I had a drug problem: I was constantly drug back and forth to church! The doors didn't open without the Wer-nettes. We were there on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday prayer meeting. One of my Sunday school friends even asked me if my dad owned the church. Now, of course, he did not own the church, but he *did* serve on the deacon board, count the money in the offering plate, announce new members when they joined, usher folks to their seats, and who knows what else. I would help him count the money after the service on Sunday morning and then ride with him to take the money downtown to the bank. To say we were heavily involved in the church would be an understatement.



Of course, I was a regular at Sunday school. I knew all the songs. I could belt them out when the situation called for it. One song we sang a lot was, "Oh, How I Love Jesus." I never truly understood why Jesus loved me. I just knew that the song said that because of His love, I loved Him. Here it is. Sing along if you want to:

There is a Name I love to hear,  
I love to sing its worth;  
It sounds like music in my ear,  
The sweetest Name on earth.

Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Because He first loved me!

It tells me of a Savior's love,  
Who died to set me free;  
It tells me of His precious blood,  
The sinner's perfect plea.

Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Because He first loved me!

It tells of One whose loving heart  
Can feel my deepest woe;  
Who in each sorrow bears a part  
That none can bear below.

Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Oh, how I love Jesus,  
Because He first loved me!<sup>1</sup>

As I grew up, I began to learn what the Scriptures said, and I learned that the lyrics mirrored the Bible. Jesus really did love me. That love did draw me to love Him. First John 4:19 tells me that I love because He first loved me. The reason I am able to love God is because He first loved me. He shows me what love is through His love for me.

How do I know God loves me? He came to earth to visit me (and you). Here is what John said: “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). In John 1:14 we are told, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” “Made his dwelling” in the original Greek language meant “tabernacled.” It means God came to earth and pitched His tent with us.

What a concept! God came and camped out with us. Have you ever travelled with someone outside your immediate family? You learn about them very quickly. You come to know when they like to eat and what kind of food they prefer. During your time with them, you will come to know when they like to get up and how many activities they like

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Whitfield, “Oh, How I Love Jesus,” 1855.



to do during the day. But, if you go *camping* with them, you get an entirely different look. Now you are eye to eye with them for twenty-four hours a day. Do not go backpacking or camping with someone unless you are sure you really like that person. And even then, you may wind up in conflict. You are just too close, and their habits affect you in ways that you cannot imagine.

Amazingly, God came to earth and walked in our shoes. He lived as a man. He didn't do it out of duty. He did it because He was crazy about His creations. God couldn't stay away from us! He wanted us to know Him so much He came to live with us—to pitch His tent with us. God camped out on earth with us so we could see Him in a whole new way. The man Jesus was God on earth. He entered our world because we are so dear to Him. His presence on this earth is a testimony that He loves us greatly.

My dad makes a four-hour drive to Houston from Tyler every so often just to come see my family and me. Before she passed away, my mom would come also. Dad has come to see Little League baseball games, to spend Christmas with us, or just for a visit. He has never mentioned that it was his duty to come to Houston. He does it because he wants to be with us. I never get over the idea that he drives a long way and alters his schedule just so he can come and see how we are doing.

Listen to this: God made time in His schedule to come to see us. At just the right time in history, He took on the form of a man named Jesus and came to earth. He did not just send a note or a bouquet; He actually came down to



earth and lived on the same planet as we do. He worked like we do. He got hungry like we do. He had friends that He hung out with, just like we do. He was a real man who was tempted just like we are, except He never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). As a human being, Jesus set a perfect model for us. He demonstrated how to truly live as a man. He not only showed us what God is like, He showed us what man could be like. God took the time to model perfect obedience through His Son.

My dad taught me to play baseball. He would stop what he was doing and go outside and play pitch. He threw to me on countless occasions so that I could learn to hit. When I was little, he would get down on his knees—on my level—to teach me how to catch and throw. When I was older, he coached my teams. He allowed his life to be interrupted by me. That’s what God did, except in a much greater way. He determined that His life would be spent with His people. *God got down on our level.*

Chapter 5 of Luke’s gospel displays how God came to “hang out” with people. In this passage, Jesus was teaching, and as He finished, He noticed two boats by the water. One of the fishermen was Simon, who would later be known as Peter. Jesus told him to go back and throw the nets out for a big catch. Remember, these guys were professional fishermen. They knew how to fish. Maybe they looked at each other and rolled their eyes. But there was something about Jesus that told them just to do it. Simon told Jesus even though they had fished all night, they would do what He said. We know how this story goes. They caught fish. I



mean a lot of fish. Their nets began to break. They signaled for another boat to come over to them, and when they brought the catch aboard, the boats started sinking. Simon Peter's reaction is recorded in verse 8: "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'" Peter recognized that it was God who was visiting him. He knew that he was not worthy to stand beside this holy God who had appeared before him in the form of this man, Jesus.

Jesus continued His journey "among us" as next He healed a leper. He reached out and touched the man (v. 13). Can you imagine God touching the sores of a leper? Then He encountered the paralytic man carried to a house by his friends. So many people wanted to see Jesus that the house was full. No problem. They just went upstairs and tore the roof off and let him down with ropes. Jesus healed the man's body but first forgave his sin. The teachers of the law who were present thought, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Right. It is only God who can erase our sins. It was God standing there with them, reading their minds and healing the man who needed help.

Toward the end of Luke 5, there is still another occurrence where Jesus stepped down to be with His people. Jesus met the tax collector, Levi. When Jesus directed him to follow, Levi got up, left EVERYTHING and followed Jesus. "Everything" would have no doubt been a handsome amount of money since the tax business was a lucrative one in which to be involved. Levi was so excited about his



new friend that he threw a big party at his house. Who did he invite to meet Jesus? Why, his friends, of course. There were tax collectors and a host of “sinners.” There is no telling who these people were and what they had done. The teachers of the law asked Jesus’ disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners?’” The disciples did not know to tell them: *Uh, this is God and He has come down from Heaven to “hang out” for a while.* Instead, Jesus Himself answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” It was these kinds of people who needed Him. They were the ones who knew that they were ill. They were sick and condemned in their sins.

What was going on? God had come to earth and loved these people in ways they could understand. He was touching their needs and in most cases, touching *them* physically. God was demonstrating His great love for them and approaching people who did not know who He was. He loved them before they loved Him. He was, as Frederick Whitfield wrote in “Oh, How I Love Jesus,” “One whose loving heart can feel my deepest woe / Who in each sorrow bears a part that none can bear below.” It was God who had interrupted His day in order to love these people. How could they not love Him back?

God acts in such a way that it clearly communicates His love. He can do nothing less since He is made of love. John says in 1 John 4:8, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” The essence of God is love. It is a pure love that has no motive or agenda. He loves us because



He wants to, not because of what we have done. In fact, He loves us *despite* what we do. Knowing that His creatures would reject him, God came to earth. And that is how we know He loves us. Look at how Paul described this love:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

—ROMANS 5:6–8

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. He came to earth and died for us, not *because* we were His best friends. He did it *despite* the fact that we were sinners who openly rebelled against Him. While my dad might come to visit me, he would probably *not* go out of his way to see his worst enemy. Who of you would take two weeks of vacation and go visit someone who hates you? No one. But that is what God did, except that He stayed for thirty-three years! He came to earth knowing that we would reject Him and that we would obey everyone else in the world, except Him. We are true enemies of God as we sin and draw others in with us. God just keeps on loving us and allows us to enjoy the world that He made. He loved us *way* before we loved Him.

How could we not want to learn more about a God who loves us when we are most unlovable? As humans, we want to get away from those who can't behave. We shy away from people who brag or curse or have to be the center of





attention. If someone hates us, our natural reaction is to hate that person right back. When we despised God and were His enemies He looked at us as a Father and came to earth to retrieve us. He wants His creations to know His love and live with the purpose He placed in them.

Now I see what the song, “Oh, How I Love Jesus,” meant. I love Jesus because He first loved me. I cannot truly experience the life of Jesus and turn away unaffected. His life among us stirs my thinking that maybe there is purpose in this chaos. There must be a great mission for me, as well as for others who have followed Him. The truths of the life of Jesus compel me (2 Corinthians 5:14) to seek Him and His kingdom.

The Scripture that began this chapter (1 John 3:1–3) says that God showed His love for us by calling us as His children. Some of you have been adopted, and you know what it feels like to be known as someone’s child. At one time you had no parents, but “strangers” were willing to give you their name, call you their child, and have accepted you. What an honor that is. I have jokingly asked some of my rich friends if they would adopt me. I would like to take advantage of their wealth when I really do not deserve it. What if the Creator of the Universe wants to adopt you? You do not deserve it, but wouldn’t it be great to be in the family of the One who thought up the world? It is possible. He loves you and has proven His love in a unique way.

This brings up one more reason why we should love God. And it is the most compelling reason of all. The best part of the story follows in the next chapter.

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been camping or on vacation with a group of people that you didn't know very well? What did you learn about them?
2. If you were God, would you have come down and "camped out" on earth? Why or why not? How would you have chosen to express your love to the world?
3. Who in your life has loved you more than you deserved? Why did they do it?
4. Who do you know who has left something that they loved in order to follow Jesus? What did they do?
5. If you believe God loved us when we were His enemies, how does that affect your concept of God?