

LOVE THAT ENDURES

Series: **LOVEFIRST**

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Love, Endurance, Jesus, Salvation

John 3:14-21, Psalm 107:1-9

One month ago, in Austin Texas, a Kenyan marathon runner showed the world what endurance looks like. Hyvon Ngetich (ee-VON nGET-ich), an elite Kalenjin marathoner from the Rift Valley ran the best 26 miles of her life at the Austin Marathon on February 15th. For the majority of those 26 miles, Hyvon led the race, and as she approached the finish line, she held a commanding lead over the rest of the women in the field. It was a beautiful 26 miles!

Unfortunately for Hyvon, a marathon is not 26 miles long. It is 26.2 miles. And it was that last .2 miles that Hyvon's body refused to go. With just under two tenths of a mile left in the race, she collapsed. Hyvon fell to the tarmac, unable to stand, briefly unable to move. It would be determined later that her blood sugar levels were dangerously low. She had spent every ounce of energy and nourishment in her body over that first 26 miles, and she had nothing left for the final two tenths.

As the medical team brought out the wheelchair, it appeared that Hyvon's race was over. Just two tenths of a mile short of the finish line, she was done.

But Hyvon refused the wheelchair. She refused any assistance at all. Instead, she somehow made her way to her knees, and using the legs that had no remaining energy, and arms that could barely hold up her slender frame, she used a technique that she had learned some 28 years earlier. She crawled. One of the world's elite marathoners - trained right here in the Rift Valley for distance running - was no longer a runner. She was a crawler.

And she crawled, hand over hand, for nearly 400 meters as the crowd of onlookers at the finish line cheered her on. Hyvon crossed the finish line in 3rd place - which speaks to the kind of lead she had built up over the course of the race.

Afterwards, race director John Conley called Ngetich "the toughest person on the planet," and he increased her prize money to equal that of the second place finisher.

News outlets around the world picked up the story. Runners and non-runners alike began to look at Hyvon for inspiration in their own battles of endurance. In those final moments of the Austin Marathon, Hyvon Ngetich reminded us just how much we love a story of endurance - against the odds, at a time when everyone expected her to give up, when no one would

have blamed her for doing so, she chose to endure, to last, to keep going when going seemed not to be an option.

Don't you love these kinds of stories? Stories of endurance inspire us, they encourage us to keep going, they challenge us to overcome our own obstacles.

This morning, we continue our series called **LOVEFIRST** with a story of endurance. It's a story that began before time began and continues to this day. It's a love story, a tragic comedy where the strands of thread that hold the story together are focused around an unrelenting God and a love that endures.

But before I get too worked up, let me pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

Prayer

You know, funny things happen in the desert. If you've ever spent any time in a true desert, you know that life can quickly become bizarro-world out there. There's something about the heat, the lack of water, the barren landscape that can cause even the most sane person to somehow fall out of balance.

In the bible, in a book that not many people actually like to read, a book called Numbers, there's a story of some strange happenings in the desert. The story is found in the 21st chapter of the book of Numbers - the third book in our modern bible - and it goes like this:

The Israelites - this family-turned-nation that grew up in slavery in Egypt and was ultimately freed by God through the person of Moses - that infant nation was going through the desert in an attempt to settle in the land of Canaan - a land promised to them by God. And as they journeyed and struggled to conquer the land, God provided food for them in the form of these flakes of bread-like substance that spread across the desert landscape each morning. The Israelite people called the flakes "manna", a word borrowed from their Egyptian captors - an Egyptian word that meant, "What is it?" And they ate this "what is it" food every day. It might not have been the most enjoyable meal but it was nourishment that they needed, and it was provided by God no matter where they traveled.

But one day, after having won a huge battle, and I guess, feeling the high of victory, the Israelite people started getting impatient with all this traveling and fighting and eating "what is it," and they complained to their leader, Moses. They said, "You've brought us out here to die! There's no bread, no water, and we are sick and tired of this stupid "what is it" food."

But very quickly, they were offered some perspective, in the form of a bajillion poisonous snakes that invaded their camp and began biting people and killing them. Oddly enough,

when faced with impending death of the slithering variety, the quality of the free food didn't seem like such a priority. Suddenly, everybody stopped grumbling about the "what is it" and started begging Moses to ask God to take the snakes away.

So, God told Moses to do something a little weird. He said, "Craft a snake out of bronze and put it on a pole, and anyone who is bitten can look at that snake and live." OK, that's odd, but Moses did it, and it worked! Not only did it save the lives of the people who were bitten, but the whole ordeal put a quick end to all the complaining about food!

That story - and the bronze snake - would leave an indelible mark on the people of Israel. They would remember that day for generations and generations. In fact, it would come up in a conversation over 1500 years later between Jesus and a religious leader named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was an important guy. He was part of a group called Pharisees - a group of men who had been thoroughly trained in the Jewish law and the stories and writings of Moses. In fact, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have likely memorized large portions of the Torah - the first five books of our modern bible, including the book of Numbers.

And Nicodemus, like many of the Pharisees, was a thinker. While there were those Pharisees who were just out for power and to make sure Jesus didn't take it away, the biblical authors also enlighten us to some Pharisees like Nicodemus who seem to really be trying to figure out this Jesus guy - who are sincere in their questioning.

And Nicodemus comes to Jesus one night - presumably so he wouldn't be seen by his other Pharisee friends - and he starts asking him questions. And Jesus tells Nicodemus some things that confuse him - like, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" or "born of the Spirit." Nicodemus really doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about, so they have this big back and forth about what it means to be born a second time. And Jesus explains that he's not talking about a human physical birth, but a spiritual birth - a kind of awakening of the soul.

By way of explanation, and as a way to connect what Jesus was doing to some of the things Nicodemus had studied in the Torah, Jesus said (this is in John 3, verse 14):

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

John 3:14-15

You see, Jesus went all the way back to Moses and the Israelites in the desert - a very familiar story for Nicodemus - and Jesus said, "Yeah, that event foreshadowed what is going

to happen to me. That snake was lifted up on that pole to save the people from death. The same is going to happen to me.”

Then he said these words, which are perhaps the most famous in all the bible. John 3:16

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

John 3:16-18

By the way, in your bible, depending on which translation you have, these verses may or may not be in quotations - they may or may not be attributed to Jesus. The truth is, we don’t know if Jesus said this or if this was a bit of an aside by the author. The original texts don’t have quotation marks or any equivalent, so we’re left to infer by the context.

However, there are many biblical scholars who think it’s highly likely that Jesus actually spoke these words - words about himself. He was attempting to stitch this all together for Nicodemus. He was telling Nicodemus that there was a kind of death that was already working among the human race, just like those snakes in the desert. And that God had sent him, Jesus, to be lifted up (ultimately, Jesus would be lifted up on a cross) so that people could be saved from that death.

And this verse, John 3:16, has been used the world over as kind of a “gospel in a nutshell” verse - you know, The Bible Redux. And I can understand that, but really, I think perhaps the verse itself has fallen victim to the same fate as Moses’ bronze snake.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. That sounds pretty good. It talks about God’s love and about him sending Jesus. It talks about believing in Jesus and having eternal life. All good stuff. All true. But not a complete picture of the purpose of Jesus. Not a complete picture of the story of God and his people. It was never meant to be that. It was simply one sentence in the midst of a greater conversation Jesus was having with Nicodemus.

Unfortunately, a lot of Christians have plucked that verse out of its larger context and built a whole theology - a whole view of God - around it. And it’s what I’ll refer to as “Transactional Christianity.” It’s a view of Jesus that says, “You can be saved if you’ll just believe in Jesus.” If you’ll just, sort of, sign on the dotted line, then you will live forever in heaven (the concept of heaven itself has been profoundly distorted by the church since the middle ages - but I don’t have time to get into that today).

But much of the church has adopted this transactional view of Jesus that's all about doing something in this life so you will have something good in the afterlife. It's a concept that is common in many world religions, but is not really a biblical concept. It's one that was adopted at some later time by the church. In fact, Jesus' teaching, and the teaching we find in the bible has as much or more to do with *this* life as it does the afterlife.

Let me read those verses again, from a slightly different translation, for the sake of viewing the words with fresh eyes. This is from the Holman Christian Standard Bible translation:

“For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world that He might condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Anyone who believes in Him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the One and Only Son of God.

“This, then, is the judgment: The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who practices wicked things hates the light and avoids it, so that his deeds may not be exposed. But anyone who lives by the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God.”

John 3:16-21 HCSB

What are these verses all about? What is Jesus talking about? He's talking about God saving the world. He's not talking about hell avoidance - some kind of eternal life insurance. He's talking about *this* world. *This* life. He's referencing those Israelites in the desert, bitten by poisonous snakes and dying, and he's saying “You don't have to die like that. God wants to save you from the poison of this world, but he's not looking to take you *out* of this world. He's looking to redeem and restore this world - to shine a light in the darkness - to bring everything into the light and set everything right. This is not a conversation about dying and going to heaven. It's a conversation about *living* and seeing heaven come to earth.

So, holding up John 3:16 like some bronze snake in the desert - as the verse that will save us all - just misses the point. I said I'm afraid this verse might have fallen victim to the same fate as Moses' bronze snake. Do you know what happened to that snake? We're later told in the book of 2 Kings that that snake was preserved after that incident and it ended up with a group of artifacts that were stored in the temple.

And as that snake was on display in the temple, people began offering sacrifices to it. They began treating it like an idol. They even gave it a name - Nehushtan. They failed to recognize the God who saved them, failed to see that bronze serpent as a reminder not to grumble against God, but to recognize his enduring love. Instead, they began to point to this object - this bronze snake - as their savior.

I wonder if we might have done the same thing with a verse like John 3:16 - pointing to this one sentence as “the gospel in a nutshell” and ignoring its true meaning in context - that God sent Jesus to save the *world*...not to save us *from* the world.

And that’s where transactional Christianity gets it wrong. The story of Jesus is not, “sign up for a religion, get out of this wicked world and go to heaven.” The story of Jesus is “come and follow me and live a life worth living.” It’s a relationship and a way of living. It’s not about what happens after we die. It’s about what happens in our life...this one *and* the one to come. And it’s a story that began long before you and I walked this earth and will continue after we leave this temporal existence and move into the next stage of our eternal life.

Imagine God, before the formation of the earth, before the creation of anything that we know today. This all-knowing God looked into the future and saw incredible potential. He could create the world and everything in it, it could function perfectly - a blissful existence for all creatures, an intimate and personal relationship with God, perfect interaction between man, animal, plant, earth, and God. The potential was there.

But the more likely outcome was not so rosey. Before the creation of the earth, God looked and saw the reality that things weren’t going to turn out perfectly. And they weren’t going to turn out perfectly because he was going to create autonomous beings. He was going to give us the ability to think for ourselves and the freedom to make our own decisions. He loved us enough to do that. But he ultimately knew that meant some of our decisions wouldn’t be good. They wouldn’t be healthy. They wouldn’t be conducive to that kind of intimate relationship he desired.

Still, though he knew it would make things much more difficult for himself, he gave us that autonomy. And what happened is what he knew would happen. But the love that he used when he created us continued to endure. He watched as humanity grew and matured. He watched us embrace our independence. He watched us walk away from his protection, from his wisdom, from his love. He knew it was going to happen. He loved us before we turned from him. He loved us when we walked away. He loves us every time we turn back to him - even just a little bit.

He never goes away. He continues to endure in his love for us. We abuse his love. We take him for granted. We shout at him and curse him. We look to make our own way, only to come crawling back to him when things don’t work out. And regardless of *our* actions - regardless of *our* heart, God’s love endures.

Before the earth began, God enacted a plan to save us from ourselves. In his enduring love, he patiently unfolded that plan, even as we grew further and further away from him. He loved not only you and me, but he loved all of creation. And how did he love?

*God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world that He might condemn the world, but that the **world** might be saved through Him.*
John 3:16-17

That is a statement about now. It's a statement about here. It's Jesus verbalizing a concept that modern Jews call *tikkun olam* (*tee-KUHN oh-LAHM*) or "repairing the world". Jesus is not saying, "Let's get out of here." He's saying, "Let's fix this thing together. Let's save it together." Jesus came to save you and to save me, but he has a purpose for us. And while it may sound like hyperbole, he wants us to join with him to save the world.

In a few minutes, we're going to close by giving you an opportunity to respond to what you've heard and experienced here. And there are 4 ways we would ask you to consider responding:

1. Singing

We're going to sing a few songs that help us reflect on God's love that endures.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

2. Prayer

If you need prayer for anything - maybe you heard something today that made you think, or maybe you or someone you know has a physical, emotional, spiritual, or other need. Whatever the case, if you would like someone to pray with you, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

3. Communion

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember him. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us. Over here, we have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

4. Giving

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

But before we enter into that time, I want to read from Psalm 107. This is from The Message paraphrase:

Oh, thank God—he's so good!

His love never runs out.

All of you set free by God, tell the world!

Tell how he freed you from oppression,

Then rounded you up from all over the place,

from the four winds, from the seven seas.

Some of you wandered for years in the desert,

looking but not finding a good place to live,

Half-starved and parched with thirst,

staggering and stumbling, on the brink of exhaustion.

Then, in your desperate condition, you called out to God.

He got you out in the nick of time;

He put your feet on a wonderful road

that took you straight to a good place to live.

So thank God for his marvelous love,

for his miracle mercy to the children he loves.

He poured great draughts of water down parched throats;

the starved and hungry got plenty to eat.

Psalm 107:1-9

Maybe you relate to those words. Maybe you're in a desert, you're exhausted, you're desperate, starving, parched. Let me encourage you. We serve a God whose love endures. He wants to pour on you those great draughts of water. No matter who you are, where you

stand, or what you've done, God's love endures. It endures for you and for those around you.

For those living in poverty, unable to find work or the dignity to face another day, God's love endures. For the young woman who has been raped continuously for years by a family member, God's love endures. For the psychopath whose inexcusable behavior can be traced back to a series of inexcusable behaviors enacted on him by others, God's love endures. For the child who is teased and bullied every day at school because she's different in some way, God's love endures. For the person who simply can't accept that there is a loving God out there anywhere, God's love endures. For you and for me, as flawed as we may be, as broken as we are, as deeply wounded and scarred, there is one truth that we can cling to even in our darkest of days. God's love endures for us.

Let's respond to him now. Let's sing and give and take communion and pray in response to God's enduring love.

Closing Prayer