

On November 7th, 1907, a boxcar containing dynamite caught fire in the village of Nacozari in Sonora, Mexico. When the flames reached the dynamite, the blast was felt 10 miles away. That would be like standing in the parking lot of Open Bible and feeling the blast that went off at the Rohan Recreation Center, in the southern Villages, Florida. The whole town of Nacozari should have been blown into the air like dandelion seeds scattered by a single, careless puff. It wasn't, however, thanks to the railroad engineer, Jesús García. When he noticed that the boxcar had caught fire, he quickly drove the car away from the town where it exploded harmlessly - harmlessly for the people of Nacozari that is but not harmlessly for Jesús. Jesús himself died in the blast. He gave his life to save the lives of many. Why did he do it? We can't ask him of course but I'm sure he would have said something like, "It was my job."

There is, of course, another Jesús who gave his life in a daring rescue. On Good Friday, Jesus of Nazareth hitched the world's sins to himself and pulled them up on the cross where God's fury exploded with a deafening silence that can still be heard 2,000 years later. Why did Jesus do it? Step close and press your eye to the keyhole of the cross and you'll see why he did it because you'll be looking into God's love. God's amazing love. Today we'll see that God's love is amazing because it's for you, and it's forever.

The train engineer, Jesús García, is hailed a hero because he saved a town of hard working people, of boys and girls, and of grandpas and grandmas. But what if he had driven a burning boxcar of TNT away from the mansion of a drug lord? Would newspaper headlines have read, "Jesús García Demonstrates Love By Dying For Drug Lords!"? More likely they would call him a fool for sacrificing his life for the sake of scum. Why not let the boxcar explode and take the drug lord and all his cronies with him? Consider then what the Apostle Paul writes about the rescue Jesus pulled off. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).

It is truly amazing that we can say, "I know God loves me" since we were once so far removed from him. God had to bring us close to him because we were powerless. There was no other way. "You, see at just the right time, when we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." We were powerless. The word for powerless has the thought of being sick and tired and weary. When you are sick you don't have the strength to work, or be with people or prepare a meal. You just want to stay in bed and sleep. Recently, I spoke with Skip Kerkhoff, who was sick for 3 weeks with Covid. He told me, he was so weak, that he actually slept for 23 hours straight, and could hardly get out of bed. He was totally dependent on his wife Carol to keep him hydrated and to get food into his body.

Because we are infected with sin from Adam's fall and the results from the sin pop up in our lives, we have no power and no strength to do the right things to make God love us and care about us. We just keep turning out more sin not just by our thoughts and actions but also by what we fail to do. Later in this book of Romans Paul will write, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

A lady once told me her favorite verse in the Bible was "God helps those who help themselves." This verse is not found in the Bible, but it is found in Benjamin Franklin's book Poor Richard's Almanac. We do not have the power to help ourselves or earn God's help. We are corrupted by sin.

Another word that describes how far we are away from God is the word "ungodly." "Christ died for the ungodly." It does not say that we are sometimes ungodly or even frequently

ungodly. It says we are just plain ungodly. That means we are not like God. We do not measure up to his standard of righteousness and holiness and purity.

There was once a movie about two guys who were not very smart. IT was called Dumb and Dumber. The one guy with the buck teeth asked a very pretty girl, "What are the chances that you might go out with me?" She responded to him with disdain in her voice, "About one in a million." He jumped up and down with joy because he at least had a one in a million chance of winning her affection. What is the chance of winning God's favor and God's love by our human effort and performance? It is always zero. Zero times any number is always zero.

There is still another word used here to show us how far we are from God and how much we need Jesus to rescue us. It is the word "enemy." Verse 10 says, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son..." Romans 8 says, "The sinful (fleshly) mind is hostile to God."

If you want to arouse the anger of people, then tell them the truth that sin is more than just robbing banks and killing people. Tell them sin involves every level of meanness that wells up in the human heart. It involves the idolatry of thinking too much about ourselves and not enough about God. Tell them the consequences of sin are eternal death and punishment in hell. Their anger level will increase even more. But then tell them that God has done everything necessary to save and rescue them through Jesus' death on the cross and they will violently turn against you just as the religious leaders did to Jesus. The human heart is hostile to God and God's plan to rescue us through the death of his Son.

Remember the story that Jesus told about the lost son. That son demanded his share of the family inheritance. He could care less what financial impact that had on his father who loved him. Then he went as far away from home as possible and spent the money in wild living. He could not stand to be in presence of his father who loved him and wanted him as his son. That's where we once were, and that's where we would be today if had not been for God's love that reached out to us and brought us back through Jesus.

Oh the incredible love of our God. Would you send your child or grandchild on to thin ice to rescue his drowning friend if you knew your son would die in the process? What if that drowning kid WASN'T your son's friend, but the bully who had stolen your son's lunch money and covered him with bruises and ridicule every recess since kindergarten? That's what God did when he sent Jesus to rescue us...and for free. You'll never receive a bill in the mail for what God did to save you from hell fire. God's love is amazing because it's for you no matter how "terrible" the sins you have committed or how small you may think those sins are.

My blood boils when I hear how an MS 13 gang member escapes conviction on some technicality. Especially when I know that gang member is just going to keep ruining lives with his continued illegal activities. But don't you think God's blood boils too when we continue to step outside of his boundaries even after he sent his Son to save us? Every morning I vow to be patient and not make minor issues into major ones, but I lose it before the day is ½ over. Is God's love withdrawn from me when that happens? Do you temporarily lose your spot in heaven when you break the law and exceed the speed limit? No. God's amazing love is forever. You and I continue to stand in his grace, says Paul. That grace holds us to God's heart the way your seatbelt holds you into your seat not just when you're cruising safely down the highway but even, no especially when you're crashing into a barrier! And so I don't have to worry about dying before I can confess some sin – as if God's love and forgiveness is something I earn by constant confession. No, my status with God depends on what Jesus has done for me. Through faith in him I am and remain a forgiven child of God. No matter what foolish thing I did

yesterday. No matter what boneheaded thing I said this morning. Everything is OK between God and me, for Jesus' blood constantly cleanses me from my sins the way eyelids constantly whisk away irritants from the eyes by blinking every few seconds.

Now you know that this doesn't mean that we can live any way we want – as if Jesus' blood scotchguards us so that we can sin without the fear of staining our robe of righteousness. Those who knowingly and willingly rush headlong into sin are as foolish as the fireman who sheds his fire jacket because “it's too hot to fight a fire in that thing.” No! He better keep that jacket on or it's going to get a lot hotter when he steps into the flames. While God's love is forever it can be forsaken, and those who forsake his love will be forbidden entrance into heaven.

But why would we want to do that? His love has given us peace and joy. I mean if God sent his Son to die for you, is he going to forget about you now? Would you spend considerable time, effort, and money restoring an antique, hand-carved cabinet to its original condition only to leave it out in the driveway where it will get ruined by a Florida rain storm? Of course not! That's what Paul was getting at when he wrote: “For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:10)

So if God loves us so much, why does he let us suffer? God often lights the fire of adversity to melt our self-sufficiency. Only then can we be molded into God's likeness the way you can mold soft wax with your fingers. That's not to say that every time adversity comes it's because we've been proud and need a call to repentance. God often lets us suffer because he wants to show off his grace. Just as a burning candle will fill a room with a pleasing scent, Christians facing the fire of adversity will give off the aroma of Christ when they turn to their Savior's love and grace to get them through.

The citizens of Nacozari were so thankful to Jesús García for saving them that they renamed their town after him. Jerusalem, however, was not renamed Jesusville in honor of the Savior's sacrifice on Good Friday. But you, dear listener, have been renamed. We were once God's enemies but thanks to Jesus are now part of God's family. This change is not just honorary. You really have peace with God. You really have a reason to rejoice. Why? Because God's amazing love is for you, and it's forever. Amen.