The Love of the Cross

Bible Study Guide
Scripture: John 3:1-21 (focus on v. 16); Numbers 21:4-9
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Opening Prayer & Welcome

Begin with prayer, thanking God for His love demonstrated at the cross. Ask Him to help us grasp the depth, height, and width of His love—love that reached us when we were unlovable, love that cost Him everything, love that transforms sinners into servants. Pray that we would respond with trusting faith, not just intellectual agreement, and that we would live lives that reflect the love we've received.

Introduction: Love That Looks Evil in the Face and Says "I Forgive You"

Key Definition: The love of the cross is sacrificial love—where God demonstrates His character by giving His unique Son to a humanity that took something precious from Him, and still says, "I forgive you."

Scripture Foundation: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." - John 3:16

The Charleston Story

In 2015, a young man walked into Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The members, not being judgmental, welcomed him to sit and study God's Word with them. Tragically, he pulled out a gun and murdered nine people during their Bible study.

At his trial, one of the daughters of the victims stood up, looked him in the face, and said: **"Even though you took something from me that I'll never get back, I still forgive you."**

That's hard. That's nearly impossible for any human being. But that's exactly what Jesus is talking about with the cross. **God gave His Son to a people who took something from God—His beloved Son. And God looks at the cross, looks at wicked and sinful humanity, and because of what we did (it cost Jesus His life), God looks at His sacrifice and says, "I forgive you. In spite of all the wrong you've done to me,**

I'm more than willing to show you and demonstrate my love to you by saying I love you and I forgive you by the sacrifice of my Son."

Questions:

1. How does the Charleston story help you understand the love of the cross?
2. What does it reveal about the nature of sacrificial love?
3. Why is it so difficult to love people who are unlovable or who've hurt us deeply?

The Big Idea

The cross is where God demonstrates sacrificial love that transforms sinners into servants, victims into victors, and the condemned into the redeemed. God's love is not motivated by our worthiness but by His own character. At the cross, the very thing that became a curse (sin and death) becomes the cure (salvation and life).

This is the invitation: Trust Jesus the same way the Israelites trusted the lifted serpent. Look to the cross in faith, be born again, and receive eternal life.

Reality #1: The Source of God's Love—It Originates in His Nature

Key Scripture: John 3:14-16

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

Main Points:

- "For" is an explanatory conjunction—it connects back to what was previously said
- "So loved" doesn't primarily mean the degree of love, but the manner of love
- The Greek word translated "so" means "in like manner" or "in the same way"
- God loved the world in the same way Moses lifted the serpent
- This shows that love originates in the nature and character of God, not in our worthiness

Key Teaching:

"When Jesus says 'for God so loved,' he's expressing something that explains what took place before. Well, what took place before? 'As Moses lifted up the serpent, so

must the Son of Man.' Then he says 'for God so loved'—which in other words he's showing that love originates in the nature and character of God."

"I used to think that 'so' when he says 'God so loved' spoke of the degree of God's love. That ain't what he's talking about. Jesus is showing Nicodemus: God so, or God in like manner, or in the same way—God loved. Well, what's the same way? It points back to verse 14 and 15. God in like manner, just like Moses lifted up the serpent, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. God loved the world the same way Moses had to lift the serpent."

Understanding "So Loved":

The word "so" (Greek: *houtos*) is an adverb that modifies the word "love." It expresses the manner—the way, the mode, the method—rather than the degree or quantity or intensity of how much God loved.

It answers the question: **In what way did God love the world?**

Answer: **In the same way Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness—God demonstrated His love by lifting up His Son on the cross.**

God's Love is Not Motivated by Our Worthiness:

This is critical: God doesn't love us because we're lovable. He doesn't love us because of our accomplishments, our goodness, or anything we bring to the table. God loves us because love is part of His essential character.

Application: Stop trying to make yourself worthy of God's love. You already aren't worthy—and that's exactly why you need it. God's love is spontaneous, generous, and without cause. He loves you simply because you exist, not because you've earned it.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does understanding that "so loved" refers to manner (not just degree) change your view of John 3:16?
2. What does it mean that God's love originates in His nature, not in our worthiness?
3. Why do we struggle to accept love we haven't earned?
4. How should this reality change the way we pursue relationship with God?

Truth Bomb:

"None of us are worthy. None of us are deserving of this kind of love. That's the reality. Stop letting people fool you, even in this church house, thinking they're worthy enough. They aren't. They need as much love as you do. And they are as unworthy as you feel."

Application:

Come to God with humility, not self-righteousness. Acknowledge that you don't deserve His love—and then receive it freely. Don't let pride ("I'm too good to need that much grace") or shame ("I'm too bad for God to love me") keep you from receiving what God offers.

Reality #2: The Scope of God's Love—It Reaches All Humanity

Key Scripture: John 3:16; John 1:29; 1 John 2:2

"For God so loved the world... Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world... He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

Main Points:

- The word "world" (cosmos) means humanity—fallen, rebellious humanity
- It does not mean a certain ethnicity, subgroup, or "good people"
- God's love extends beyond Israel to all nations, all people groups
- "Whosoever" means anyone, everyone, all—no distinctions
- God loves the ungodly, the hostile, the broken—those least deserving of it

Key Teaching:

"There are some who take the position that 'world' there means just simply Jews or just simply one race. The word *kosmos* never means a certain ethnicity. It never means a certain subgroup of people. God so loved the world—now the world, *kosmos*, there literally means humanity."

"God's scope of love is that He loved a humanity that He knew wouldn't love Him back. Do you want one better? He's telling Nicodemus: God was so in love with the world, a world that He knew was going to kill His Son."

"*Kosmos* means fallen humanity in rebellion—the very ones least deserving of it. The ungodly, the multitude, the whole mass of men alienated from God and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ."

The Radical Scope of Love:

God doesn't just love the lovable. He loves:

- The hostile (those who hate Him)
- The broken (those crushed by sin)
- The rebellious (those who shake their fist at Him)

- The ungodly (those who reject His ways)
- The multitude (not just a select few)

This love is so radical, so expansive, so comprehensive that it covers every human being who has ever lived or will live. There is no one outside the reach of God's love.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it significant that God loved "the world" and not just a certain group?
2. How does understanding the scope of God's love affect the way you view evangelism and missions?
3. Who in your life do you struggle to believe God loves? Why?
4. How should the scope of God's love change the way you treat people who are hostile or broken?

Truth Bomb:

"No one is outside of the reach of God's love. It covers all parameters. You think of the worst sinner—God's love can reach it. You think of the worst or the violent person—God's love can reach it. His love reaches the nastiest of people. It changes and transforms the worst of minds, the darkest of minds. God's love can transform and change a person."

Application:

Stop writing people off as "too far gone" or "beyond saving." If God's love can reach you, it can reach anyone. Pray for those who seem unreachable. Share the gospel with confidence, knowing God's love has no boundaries.

Reality #3: The Sacrifice of God's Love—He Gave His Son

Key Scripture: John 3:16; Romans 5:6-8

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son... For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Main Points:

- True love is not words, but giving
- The word "gave" (*edoken*) means to relinquish, to endure the loss of someone precious
- God gave His "only begotten" (*monogenes*)—unique, one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable Son

- This is not a gift—it's a sacrifice, bloody and brutal
- God gave His Son to a humanity that would murder Him

Key Teaching:

"True love is not words, but giving. God gave the very essence of Himself on the cross. You ain't just looking at Jesus on the cross. You're looking at God on the cross. He gives the very essence of God. So God is saying: just as sure as you crucify my son, it's like crucifying me, Jehovah God."

"The word 'gave' means to relinquish, to endure the loss of someone or something. God was more than willing to give my son to a nasty, ugly, sinful, dark humanity. I'll relinquish something that's precious to me. I'll give over something that's costly to me. He says, 'It'll be in the form of my son.'"

"The cross isn't an afterthought, but it's the ultimate sacrifice. And let me be clear: I was guilty of going to John 3:16 and preaching that as a nice Christmas sermon. Ain't nothing Christmassy about that. That's a sacrifice. As a matter of fact, it's bloody."

What "Only Begotten" Means:

The Greek word *monogenes* means unique in kind, one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable. Jesus is not just another prophet or good teacher. He is the unique Son of God who carries the very essence of deity.

Same language God used when He told Abraham in Genesis 22: "Go and offer your son Isaac, your only son, the son whom you love."

Application for us: When it comes to saving my soul, keeping my soul, and keeping me through this dark time, I need somebody that ain't like everybody else. I need this Savior to be special. I need Him to be different than all men because He is special and He can do special things in my life.

The Brutality of the Sacrifice:

Don't sanitize the cross. God allowed His Son to be:

- Murdered
- Slaughtered
- Beaten with whips until His flesh was torn open
- Spit upon
- Mocked
- Stripped naked and hung as a human spectacle
- Pierced with nails through His hands and feet
- Crowned with thorns

God loved the world in such a way that He allowed you to do this to His Son. That's the kind of love we're talking about.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it important to remember that the cross is brutal and bloody, not just a "nice story"?
2. What did it cost God to demonstrate His love at the cross?
3. How does the sacrifice of Jesus reveal the seriousness of sin?
4. How should understanding this sacrifice affect your daily obedience and worship?

Truth Bomb:

"I love the world in such a way that I'm willing to give my son to be murdered for you, slaughtered for you, beaten for you, whipped for you, spit upon for you, made mockery of for you. I love the world in such a way that I allow you to strip my son of the clothes that he's wearing and you put him up there as a human spectacle."

Application:

Never take the cross for granted. Every time you come to the Lord's Table, remember the body broken and blood spilled. Let the sacrifice fuel your gratitude, your worship, and your obedience. When tempted to sin, remember what it cost Jesus to save you.

Reality #4: The Simplicity of God's Love—Whosoever Believes

Key Scripture: John 3:16-18

"That whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved."

Main Points:

- The condition is faith, not works or lawkeeping
- "Whosoever" means anyone—no exclusions based on race, ethnicity, or past
- Belief (*pistis*) is not just intellectual agreement, but trusting faith
- Faith is trust that commits one's life, places confidence in Jesus
- This is saving faith—trusting Jesus to do what He said He would do

Key Teaching:

"Whosoever believes—that's the prerequisite. Now, this belief, family, is not faith that simply says, 'Yeah, I believe you come from God. I believe there's something different about you.' That's an assent to a truth. Real faith is trusting faith."

"You remember last Sunday I told you: when you walk in here, you look at these pews, you believe these are pews. Well, that's part of your faith. The next part of your faith is trusting that these pews will hold you. That's the kind of faith Jesus is talking about. Not just believing something to be true, but trusting, putting full confidence in what you believe to be true."

"Jesus redirects Nicodemus from trusting in personal performance to a particular person. Which is some of our problem. We trust in our personal performance instead of a particular person. We trust in how well I do it, how good I look. That's you trusting in personal performance. Jesus said, 'No, you need to trust in a particular person—Christ.'"

Two Kinds of Faith:

1. Intellectual Faith (Assent to Truth):

- "I believe Jesus is the Son of God"
- "I believe He died on the cross"
- "I believe the Bible is true"

This is necessary, but not sufficient. Even demons believe and tremble (James 2:19).

2. Trusting Faith (Commitment and Action):

- "I trust Jesus enough to obey Him"
- "I commit my life to Him"
- "I place my full confidence in Him to save me"

This is saving faith—faith that acts on what God says.

The Chair Illustration:

You believe this chair will hold you (intellectual faith). But you demonstrate trusting faith when you actually sit down in the chair. That's the kind of faith Jesus requires—faith that trusts Him enough to obey what He commands.

Nicodemus's Problem:

Nicodemus was a Pharisee—religious, law-keeping, self-righteous. He trusted in his personal performance. Jesus said, "You need to be born again." Nicodemus struggled because he was trying to rationalize spiritual things with human logic.

Jesus' message: Stop trusting in what you can do. Start trusting in who I am and what I can do for you. You need to be born again—and that happens when you trust Me enough to do what I say.

Discussion Questions:

1. What's the difference between believing Jesus is the Son of God and having saving faith in Him?
2. How is faith demonstrated beyond mental agreement?
3. Why do religious people sometimes struggle more with trusting faith than openly sinful people?
4. What does it mean to be "born again," and how is that connected to faith and baptism?

Truth Bomb:

"Every time you trust in your performance, you're going to mess up. And you're going to realize that it's never enough. And the people you're trying to impress don't care. You're trying to impress people with your personal performance, and they're like, 'Whatever. Last week you were just with me.' What you should care about is the particular person—Jesus Christ—to keep you saved."

Application:

Stop performing for people. Stop trying to impress God with your religious activity. Trust Jesus. Obey what He commands—believe, repent, be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. Walk in relationship with Him, not in religious performance.

Reality #5: The Security of God's Love—Eternal Life

Key Scripture: John 3:16-17

"That whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved."

Main Points:

- Those who trust Jesus escape perishing (eternal separation from God)
- Those who trust Jesus receive everlasting life (eternal fellowship with God)
- The purpose of the cross is not just rescue from wrath, but restoration to God's presence
- This is eternal security based on trusting faith in Jesus
- There are two roads: eternal fellowship or eternal damnation

Key Teaching:

"The end goal of love is for you to have an eternal relationship with Him. You escape perishing and you receive eternal life. That's forever, family. That's the purpose. So the end goal of love is for you to have an eternal relationship with Him."

"Either you can trust and believe Jesus, accept what Jesus says, and receive eternal fellowship, or you can reject Jesus and receive eternal damnation. And I know you hardly ever hear about hell. And so people go along thinking that hell ain't real. Well, the problem is preachers don't preach that. We got a whole lot of people walking around thinking, 'I can live my best life on my terms.' And you don't realize that outside of Christ, you are headed to a hell that wasn't for you. God constructed hell for the devils and his demons."

Two Destinies:

If you trust Jesus:

- You will not perish (escape eternal separation from God)
- You have everlasting life (eternal fellowship with God)
- You are secure in His love forever
- You are restored into God's presence

If you reject Jesus:

- You will perish (eternal separation from God)
- You will experience eternal damnation
- You will spend eternity in a place designed for Satan and demons
- You will be separated from God's love forever

The Cross: Rescue and Restoration:

The cross isn't just about escaping hell (though it is that). The cross is about being restored into relationship with God. Salvation is not just fire insurance—it's being brought into the family of God, adopted as His children, given eternal inheritance.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does understanding eternal life as "relationship with God" (not just "going to heaven") change your perspective on salvation?
2. Why do you think many churches avoid preaching about hell?
3. How should the reality of two eternal destinies affect the urgency with which we share the gospel?
4. What does it mean to be secure in God's love?

Truth Bomb:

"The cross accused not just rescue from wrath, family, but restoration in God's presence. A gift is not truly enjoyed until it's received and owned. God's love offers eternal life, but it has to be received."

Application:

Receive the gift. Don't just acknowledge it intellectually—act on it. Trust Jesus enough to obey Him. Be born again through faith expressed in baptism. Walk in newness of life. And live with the security that comes from knowing you belong to God forever.

The Story Behind the Story: Numbers 21 and the Bronze Serpent

Key Scripture: Numbers 21:4-9

"Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became impatient because of the journey. The people spoke against God and Moses... The LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. So the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you; intercede with the LORD, that He may remove the serpents from us.' And Moses interceded for the people. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.' And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived."

The Story:

Israel had just won a major victory—God delivered the Canaanites into their hands. But then the journey got a little longer than expected, and the people became impatient. They complained against God and Moses: "Why have you brought us up here to die? There's no food or water—and we loathe this miserable food!"

Wait—which is it? No food, or food you don't like? They were so consumed by complaining that they contradicted themselves.

God sent poisonous serpents among them. Many were bitten and died. The people came to Moses and confessed: "We have sinned. Intercede for us." Moses prayed, and God gave unusual instructions: "Make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole. Everyone who is bitten, when they look at it, will live."

The Parallel to the Cross:

The Problem: Israel was poisoned by the sting of serpents (we are poisoned by the sting of sin).

The Solution: Look at the lifted serpent (look to the lifted Christ on the cross).

The Result: Those who looked lived (those who trust Jesus receive eternal life).

The Irony: What became a curse (the serpent) became the cure. What should have killed them saved them. The very thing that represented death became the instrument of life.

The Application to Jesus: Jesus became what we deserved to be—cursed. "Cursed is every man who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). But thanks be to God, Jesus became a curse for us so that we could be healed. The cross—an instrument of shame, torture, and death—became the means of our salvation.

Why Jesus Used This Story:

Jesus was addressing Nicodemus's unbelief. Nicodemus was trying to rationalize spiritual things with human logic. Jesus said, "Remember when Israel was in the wilderness and they were dying from snake bites? Remember what Moses did? He lifted up a bronze serpent, and everyone who looked at it in faith was healed. Nicodemus, that's what's about to happen to Me. I'm going to be lifted up on a cross. And just like those Israelites had to look to the serpent to be saved, you're going to have to look to Me on the cross and trust Me to save you."

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the bronze serpent story help you understand the cross?
2. What does it mean that the curse became the cure?
3. Why is "looking" to Jesus in faith the requirement for salvation?
4. How does understanding this Old Testament background deepen your appreciation for John 3:16?

Truth Bomb:

"God used what became a curse to Israel to save them. The very thing that became a curse became the cure. Jesus, family, took the curse for us. Every Jew would understand that if you hung on a tree, you were cursed. Jesus says, 'Exactly right. I'm going to take the curse of sin, hang on this cross, so that you can be healed.' He became what we should have been—a cursed person on the cross, dying for our sins, because we committed the crime."

Application:

Look to Jesus. Just as the Israelites had to look at the lifted serpent in faith to be healed, you must look to the lifted Christ in faith to be saved. Don't try to figure it all out

with human logic—trust what God has said and act on it.

Practical Application: How to Receive the Love of the Cross

Stop Trying to Earn It

God's love is to be received, not achieved. Stop performing. Stop trying to make yourself worthy. You can't earn this love—it's freely given based on God's character, not your performance.

Practical Steps:

- Confess that you are unworthy of God's love
- Acknowledge that you have nothing to offer God that would obligate Him to love you
- Accept that His love is a gift without cause

Trust the Particular Person, Not Your Personal Performance

Stop trusting in how well you keep the rules. Stop comparing yourself to others. Trust in Jesus Christ—the particular person who can save you.

Practical Steps:

- Shift your confidence from your religious activity to Jesus' finished work
- Stop saying, "I'm not as bad as so-and-so"
- Start saying, "I'm a sinner in need of the grace only Jesus can give"

Look to the Lifted Christ

Just as the Israelites looked to the bronze serpent and were healed, look to Jesus on the cross and be saved.

Practical Steps:

- Believe that Jesus is the Son of God
- Repent of your sins—turn away from them and toward God
- Be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins (Acts 2:38)
- Trust that when you do this, God will regenerate you—make you a new creature, wash you white as snow

Live in the Security of His Love

Once you've been born again, live in the freedom and security of God's love. You are no longer condemned. You are in eternal fellowship with God.

Practical Steps:

- Stop carrying guilt God has removed
- Walk in newness of life
- Extend the same "without cause" love to others that God extended to you
- Remember the cross daily—let it fuel your worship, obedience, and gratitude

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For the One Who Needs to Be Born Again

If you've never responded to the gospel in faith, repentance, and baptism, today is your day. Here's what Jesus is offering you:

The Problem: You are poisoned by sin. You are separated from God. You are on the road to eternal separation.

The Solution: Look to the lifted Christ. Trust Him. Obey Him.

The Promise: You will not perish but have everlasting life. You will be born again—regenerated, made new, washed clean.

The Response:

1. Believe that Jesus is the Son of God, crucified and raised for you
2. Repent—turn from your sins and turn to God
3. Be baptized—immersed in water for the forgiveness of your sins
4. Receive the Holy Spirit and walk in newness of life

For the Christian Who Needs to Come Home

Maybe you've been born again, but you've walked away. You've gone back to the old life. You're carrying guilt you shouldn't be carrying.

Good news: God's love hasn't changed. The cross is still powerful. The blood of Jesus still cleanses. Come home. Confess your sins. Be restored (1 John 1:9; 2:1-2).

Group Discussion & Reflection

Discussion Questions:

1. **What stood out to you most in this message about the love of the cross?**

2. **How does understanding that God's love is "in the same manner" as Moses lifting the serpent change your view of John 3:16?**
3. **Why do we struggle to accept love we didn't earn and can't repay?**
4. **How does the scope of God's love (reaching the hostile, broken, and rebellious) challenge the way we view evangelism?**
5. **What's the difference between trusting in your personal performance and trusting in the particular person of Jesus Christ?**
6. **How should the sacrifice of the cross affect the way we live day-to-day?**

Personal Reflection:

- **Have you been born again?** If not, what's holding you back from trusting Jesus enough to obey Him?
- **Are you trusting in your personal performance or in Jesus?**
- **How can you extend the same "without cause" love to others that God has shown you?**

Closing Prayer

Father, we stand amazed at Your love. We confess that we are unworthy—we gave You no reason to love us, yet You loved us anyway. Thank You that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Thank You that You didn't just say You loved us—You demonstrated it by giving Your unique, irreplaceable Son to die in our place. Thank You that the cross is where the curse became the cure, where death became life, where condemnation became justification. Help us to look to the lifted Christ in trusting faith. Help us to be born again through faith expressed in baptism. And help us to live every day in the freedom and security of Your love. For those who need to come home, draw them back. For those who've never trusted You, give them courage to act today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

For Further Study

Additional Scriptures:

- Genesis 22:1-14 (Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac)
- Romans 5:6-10 (While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us)
- 1 John 4:7-21 (God is love; He loved us first)
- Ephesians 2:1-10 (By grace you have been saved through faith)
- Galatians 3:10-14 (Christ became a curse for us)
- John 3:1-21 (Full context of Jesus and Nicodemus)

Memory Verse:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." - John 3:16

Remember: God's love is not motivated by your worthiness but by His character. He loved a world that hated Him. He gave His Son to a humanity that would murder Him. And through the cross, He looks at you and says, "I forgive you. I love you. Be born again."