

## SO-THE SHORTEST BIG WORD IN SCRIPTURE

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For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

There were occasions when the men who wrote the Bible could not find words capable of expressing the wonder which filled their souls. For example, when Paul wrote to the Philippians, he said, "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). The apostle could speak and write about it, but he only touched the fringe of his topic. He was as a child placing toes into the ocean without understanding the size of the sea. Even the officers sent to apprehend Jesus returned to the authorities with a sense of awe, exclaiming, "Never man spake like this man" (John 7:46).

Since the beginning of time men have tried to explain the magnitude of the love of God, but all remained dissatisfied with their efforts. They were trying to express the inexpressible. Paul, who was one of the greatest exponents of the Christian faith, wrote:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

David was apparently overwhelmed with the universality of that love when he wrote:

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me (Ps. 139:8-9).

The writers of the New Testament who were overwhelmed by the same thought eventually discovered the simplicity of

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the small word "so." It seemed to convey more in a moment than could be expressed in lengthy orations. Webster's Dictionary has twenty-four small paragraphs which explain the meaning of this diminutive expression. I remember asking a small child how much she loved her father, and, stretching her arms wide, she replied, "Sooooooooo much." That child would have pleased the early Christians,

The Immeasurable Love... "For God so loved the world" (John 3:16)

John was a man of vision, a dreamer, and unlike his colleagues who concentrated on the ministry of their Master, he explored eternity. He supplied no details concerning the birth of Jesus and was content to say Christ came from where He had been. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). John saw the Lord bringing planets into existence and creating order out of chaos. He said Jesus was the WORD-the eternal expression of the Almighty. Sir James Jeans, the famous astronomer, said, "There are more worlds in space than there are grains of sand on all the beaches of

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earth." The world possesses great lengths of sandy shores, but it would be difficult to count the grains in a single handful.

It is hard to understand how the Lord created billions of planets by issuing a command and incomprehensible that He should be concerned about insignificant people. He bridged a gap between infinity and time. John was amazed that God could love sinners enough to allow His Son to die on their behalf. How could such affection be described? Should it be called great love or the greatest love? Should he say it was broader than oceans, higher than the sky, and longer than time? John solved his problem by using the word "SO." When he indicated that God's compassion was greater than every demand made upon it, he wrote: "For God SO loved the world. The Lord was capable of loving the unlovely. If it were possible for the world's greatest orator to speak for all eternity about the love of God, so much would still be left unsaid that he would have to begin again with identical results. One of the greatest attempts to express the love of God was

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made by Frederick Lehman who lived from 1868 until 1953. He wrote:

Could we with ink the ocean fill,  
And were the skies of parchment made;  
Were every stalk on earth a quill,  
And every man a scribe by trade.  
To write the love of God above  
Would drain the ocean dry;  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,  
Though stretched from sky to sky.

O Love of God, how rich and pure;  
How measureless and strong.  
It shall for evermore endure,  
The saints' and angels' song.

The Impressed Listeners... "And so spake" (Acts 14:1)  
And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed (Acts 14:1).

Iconium was the capital city of its province. It was situated in the midst of very fertile plains which were irrigated by

streams from mountains on three sides of the city. It was a cultural and educational center where Romans, Greeks, and Jews lived in harmony. Caesar had established a garrison of troops there, the Jews built a synagogue, and the educated Greeks played an important part in the management of the community. Religion was varied; the Romans had many gods, the Greeks worshiped Jupiter, and the Hebrews believed in Jehovah. A temple to Jupiter had been erected in the area, and its devotees supported their own priest. During one of their missionary journeys, Paul and Barnabas arrived in the city and attended the Sabbath service. It was customary for the rabbi to encourage strangers to address the congregation, and the missionaries accepted his invitation.

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John Kitto says:

"From Antioch in Pisidia, the apostolic travelers turned their steps eastward in the direction of Lycaonia, and traversing the barren uplands, after a journey of ninety-three miles, descended to the plain in which Iconium, the capital of the province stood. Here, mountains whose summits lie in the region of perpetual snow, arise on every side except toward the east, where a plain as flat as the desert of Arabia extends far beyond the reach of the eye. The town was pleasantly situated, and in the midst of luxurious gardens and fertile fields. Imagine Paul entering such a place; clothed in eastern dress; diminutive in stature-slightly lame; with a long thin beard, a bald head, a transparent complexion, bright grey eyes, overhanging eyebrows, a cheerful expression of countenance. His whole appearance was indicative of failing health. Such is the description of him which we find in early literature, which, though not in this respect to be implicitly trusted, yet perhaps conveys to us a good deal which is substantially true. He and his friend Barnabas sat down. After the reading of the lessons from the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue, seeing that these strangers were respectable, thoughtful, devout-looking men, sent to them to enquire if they have any word of exhortation to address to the people. It is still the custom for persons who are not ministers to take part in synagogue service; and we remember hearing an Italian merchant deliver a discourse in a synagogue at Leghorn."

When enemies aroused the anger of the citizens, Paul and Barnabas were compelled to flee to adjacent cities, but many years later the memory of persecution endured in Iconium remained. Writing to Timothy, Paul said, "Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured; but out of them all the Lord delivered me" (2 Tim. 3:11). Luke never mentioned anything about Paul's sermon; he was only concerned with

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the apostle's effectiveness. "They SO ..... "The preachers were so convincing, that "multitudes both of the Jews and also of the Gentiles believed" (see Acts 14:1).

It is disappointing when preachers speak about the matchless love of God and never exhibit any emotion. Dr. Jowett, the famous English minister, said "Unless the preacher is stirred by his sermon, it will never inspire a congregation." Many Christians shout at sporting events and almost fight at elections, but they are seldom enthusiastic about the death of the Son of God. These people are enigmas. After one of my evangelistic services in the City Hall, Perth, Australia, an usher overheard two business men discussing the preacher. One said: "What did you think of that? Did you believe what he said?" His colleague replied, "No, but he does!" All pastors should so preach, that listeners will become receptive. If street corner salesmen can effectively sell rubbish, ministers should be equally successful as they recommend the greatest message given to men.

The Important Loss... "so great salvation" (Heb. 2:3)

It may be difficult for Christians to understand the hardships endured by early Jewish believers who lived in an alien world

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where ruthless enemies were a constant menace. Many who had been attracted to the church watched as neighbors were imprisoned and friends fed to ravenous beasts. It was one

thing to hear about the love of a Heavenly Father, but another to explain why he did not intervene to help His devoted children. Why was the Lord slow in aiding His people?

The Jews who had worshiped in the temple were unable to continue, for their sanctuary had been destroyed. Sacrifices were no longer offered, and apparently their entire religious world had collapsed. God did nothing to prevent the catastrophe. The writer to the Hebrews was concerned that people who had been so close to the kingdom of God were in danger of losing their souls. This letter was not only a brilliant exposition of Jewish doctrines; it was also a desperate appeal urging people to be aware of great danger. The readers were reminded how the King of angels had been crucified to put

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away sin. This was a very great salvation which only heaven could supply.

When Simon Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost he announced to his audience, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). God's servants emphasized an important fact-'MEN MUST BE SAVED.' It was necessary for the Son of God to come to earth, for no other Savior could do what needed to be done. The Hebrews were asked a very important question: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" It was impossible to answer that question, for there was no way of escape. The Lord said, "If ye die in your sins, where I go ye cannot come." Unless He meant what He said, Jesus was a deceiver. The Savior, in preaching to the people of His generation, said, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). Unfortunately, modern congregations dislike that kind of preaching, but nothing can change the fact that these words were spoken by the Lord. People need to be warned of the possible consequences of rejection by God. The Almighty provided this "SO GREAT SALVATION" but it must be accepted by those who need it. To lose such a treasure leads to eternal bankruptcy.

1. Kitto's Daily Bible Illustrations (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1984).

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