

The Covenant Pulpit



1 John 3:1-3

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A massive earthquake rocked Soviet Armenia on a bitterly-cold December morning in 1988. Twenty-five thousand people were killed within minutes, and thousands more died in the days that followed. Among those buried under the rubble of a nine-story apartment house were Susanna Petroyan and her daughter, Gayaney. In the cold darkness, Gayaney cried out,

“Mommy, I’m so thirsty. I want a drink.”

But Susanna was trapped flat on her back in a few inches of breathing space under tons of collapsed concrete, with nothing to give her little girl. She frantically groped in the darkness until her fingers bumped into a 24-ounce jar of blackberry preserves. Within two days her daughter had eaten all the jam and licked the jar clean. Again she complained, *“Mommy, I’m so thirsty.”*

Susanna was resigned to death, but desperate for her daughter to live. She tore off her dress and made a bed for Gayaney. She peeled off her stockings, wrapping them around the child to keep her warm. In the darkness, Susanna lost track of time. Unable to move, she lost hope. As days dragged by, she began to hallucinate. Fitful moments of sleep brought brief escape from the horror of her entombment. But something always awakened her—piercing cold, gnawing hunger, or the pleading of Gayaney: *“Mommy, I’m still thirsty.”*

At some point in her perpetual night, Susanna realized that, though she had no water to give her thirsty little girl, she had her own blood. Her groping fingers, numb from the freezing cold, found a piece of shattered glass. She sliced open her left index finger and gave it to her daughter to suck. It was not enough. *“Please, Mommy, I want more. Cut another finger.”* She had no idea how many times she cut herself over the next days. When rescue workers broke through the rubble, a dehydrated Susanna was hovering at death’s edge, but Gayaney was warmly wrapped in the shivering arms of her mother.

Entombed in the rubble of life that has caved in on us, and trapped in the darkness of despair, we cry out to God,

“Heavenly Father, I’m so thirsty!”

That first Christmas, our Father steps down from heaven, and voluntarily enters the wreckage of our collapsed lives. Later he hangs naked on a cross so that the nakedness of our sin might be covered by the warmth of his righteousness. He is imprisoned in a cold tomb so that his sons and daughters can live forever.

From the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, every part of his body was lacerated. Blood flowed from his wounds. He said to his thirsty children, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life..." (John 6:54). And those of us, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, are satisfied by his blood.

No wonder, his *Beloved Apostle* exclaims in 1 John 3:1, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us..." What St. John goes on to say in the next few verses is not only a magnificent expression of our heavenly Father's love for his children; it is a profoundly-practical prescription for how we can become more like him in the future. For all of us who want to experience a life-altering year in 2010, here's the transforming truth:

**If we are to be transformed into the Father's image,
we need to see ourselves through the Father's eyes.**

2009 has been a tough year. But 2010 is on its way. We can all say with Ophra Winfry, "Cheers for the New Year and another chance to get it right." *Kansas City Star* columnist, Billy Vaughan wrote, "An optimist stays up to midnight to see the New Year in. A pessimist stays up to make sure the old year leaves." I'm the optimist. I want to forget the past and seize my future, energized by the words of St. Paul in Romans 8:37, "...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Maybe you feel discouraged or defeated today. Perhaps your marriage is on the rocks or your finances are on the ragged edge. Maybe another year has passed and you still haven't been able to shake a habit, break an addiction, stand up to a fear, fess up to a sin, or fix a broken relationship. Would you dare believe with me that this year could be different?

I'm not saying that change is easy. Mark Twain wrote, "Most people look forward to the new year for a new start on an old habit." Playwright Oscar Wilde observed, "Good resolutions are simply checks men draw on a bank where they have no account." But we don't have to draw on the limited human resources of another failed banking system. The infinite power of the Resurrected Christ has been put into our personal accounts, and is available 24/7 for instant and unlimited withdrawal.

As we stand on the cusp of 2010, we do well to consider the words of the great Roman Catholic writer C.K. Chesterton: "The object of a New Year is not that we should have a new year. It is that we should have a new soul." Changed lives come from changed souls. Look at the Apostle's words in 1 John 3:1-3:

“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God. And that’s what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are the 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.”

For a moment, focus on those last words: “Everyone who has this hope purifies himself...” The original Greek verb *purifies* was used in the iron foundry. Metals are liquefied in intense heat so that hidden impurities can bubble up to the top and be scooped away. God wants us to have strong mettle. In life’s battles we can’t afford to crack under stress. Our hope in 2010 should be that more impurities are exposed and eliminated. In short, we should want to be more holy. Look again at those words: “Everyone who has this *hope* in him purifies himself...” It is a *hope* that will make us holy. St. John tells us four things about that hope:

1. Love births holiness.

St. John begins his soaring song of hope with these words in verse one: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us.” The Apostle is like a child pouncing on the biggest present under the Christmas tree, ripping off the ribbons and paper in frenzy of excitement. Words gush out of his mouth in childlike joy. “How great is the love...” In the original language, you might read, “*From another country* is the love the Father has lavished on us.” He’s saying, “This love is from another place...there’s nothing like it on this earth...” In modern language we would shout, “It’s out of this world!” John continues: “...the love the father has *lavished* on us...” The Greek word for *lavish* means to spend everything you have, holding nothing back, pouring it all out to the last drop in the most scandalous and wasteful way. St. John says that it is this lavish love that motivates us to purity of love.

This is radically-different from the motivational tactics of our world. We make our resolutions, set our jaws, and chug up the track like *The Little Train who Could* repeating, “I think I can...I think I can...I think I can...I **know** I can...” But, eventually we run out of steam and begin to roll backwards into old habits. Then we berate ourselves for yet another failure of willpower, emotionally flagellating ourselves like penitent Mideaval monks. We wallow in self-pity. Then we hear some inspirational speaker or guilt-producing sermon, jazz ourselves up with another pep talk, and trudge out again to win the battle of willpower.

We try to motivate others the same way: we cajole, complain, manipulate, threaten, lecture, push, punish, berate, and even assault folks to get them on the “right track.” It seldom works. Someone has defined “crazy” as repeatedly doing the same thing while expecting different results. But “crazy” doesn’t keep us from recycling the same failed strategies to fix our spouses, children, or other misguided souls who don’t see it “our way” —driving them crazy in the process!

But John says that only God’s kind of love will motivate people to do the “pure” or “holy” or “right” thing. In 2 Corinthians 5:14, St. Paul gives the secret to doing the “right” thing: “The love of God compels us...” The Greek word for *compel* means to squeeze with force, like toothpaste out of a tube. We can’t help but move in God’s direction when we have been squeezed by his love. We do the right thing because we *want* to do it, not because we *have* to do it. If you turn over to 1 John 4:19 you will read, “We love because [God] first loved us.” We will never love God with a holy lifestyle until we grasp how much he *first* loved us. A hymn writer captures this love with these words:

O the deep, deep love of Jesus;
Vast, unmeasured, boundless free!
Rolling as a mighty ocean;
in its fullness over me.
Underneath me, all around me
is the current of his love...

I read about a woman who for years had been married to a harsh husband. Everyday he gave her a list of chores to complete before he returned home. If she didn’t complete them, he would explode in anger. Even if she did her work, it was never good enough for her husband. She always felt inadequate and fearful in the face of his perfectionism.

Thankfully, this tyrant of a husband died. Some time later she remarried, this time to a man who lavished her with tenderness and adoration. One day, while going through a box of old papers, she came across some of her first husband’s lists. As she read the old demands, tears began to splash on the paper. She suddenly realized that she was doing all these things, and more, for her new husband—not because he demanded it of her, but because she loved the husband who *first* loved her. Unconditional love is the most powerful force in this universe.

2. Our identity is set by heaven.

Let’s complete the opening statement of verse one: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, *that we should be called the children of*

God!" When I read the original Greek, I get the sense that John can hardly believe what he is saying: "We are children of God? We *are* children of God. Hey everyone, we *really* are children of God!" He emphasizes it again in verse one: "And that is what we are!" Just in case we still haven't grasped this amazing truth, he repeats it a third time in verse two: "Dear friends, *now* we are children of God."

My background uniquely qualifies me to grasp the sense of St. John's excitement. My birth mother was unwed. I never knew my birth father. When my birth mother abandoned me at age six, I went through the revolving door of eight foster homes. If you always had a family, you can't viscerally appreciate the emotional pain and emptiness of being a rootless and fatherless child. I used to lie in bed at night fantasizing about what my dad looked like, imagining him appearing one day and taking me home. But he never showed up. During those lost years, I had several last names: Brown, Strickland, Olsen, Winters, and Edwards. At age 12, the state psychologists said that I had the sociability of a four year-old, and no fixed sense of identity. I become whatever I needed to be to be accepted by others.

You can't imagine the joy I felt when Arnold and Mary Petterson came to adopt me. When Mary said, "Bobby, we love you," it was like being born again. When Arnold said, "Bobby, would you like to be my son and have my name?" I thought I was going to pass out from the joy. After they took me home, some mean kids taunted me at school, "You aren't a real kid. You're adopted." That night I asked my new Mom, "Am I really your son?" Mary took me in her arms and said, "Bobby, you are more special than those other kids. Their mothers had to take what they got at the hospital. But you are a chosen child."

It took me a long time to accept the fact that I was really a Petterson kid. When my dad or mom got mad at me, I would get hysterical. For the longest time I worried that they were going to send me back to the welfare department. I worked hard to earn their love, always trying to be a perfect son. I was in my 30s before I was at peace with the fact that they loved me unconditionally. I think we do the same thing with God. Somehow we have to be reminded over and over again that he really loves us unconditionally. We don't have to work to earn a place in his family. We can never lose it, by messing up.

When Arnold died, for the first time since I was a child, I felt fatherless again. The grief was excruciating. Then I opened his *Last Will and Testament*, and read, "To my beloved son, Robert Arnold Petterson, I leave everything I possess." And that's what God says to each of his sons and daughters. I *am* my father's son! When you see me, you see

Arnold Petterson. I am a reflection of that Scandinavian fisherman's love for a messed up and fatherless boy. In the same way, I am becoming more and more a reflection of my heavenly Father. It is my desire that you will see more of him in me in 2010!

3. The world is a funhouse mirror.

St. John goes on to say in verse two, "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." We have a hard time believing that God loves us unconditionally because we have allowed ourselves to be defined as losers and misfits by the world. Those kids on the school playground tried to redefine me by saying that I wasn't a "real" son. To them I was a "second-hand" son. They were the children of the "world" that St. John talks about. If they had really known God, they would have known I was *his* son. They would have seen my dignity and worth. St. John says that the "world" can never define us correctly because it lacks the father's heart and eyes.

We don't know what we look like until we look into a mirror. When we were born, we had no sense of identity. We didn't know if we were male or female, rich or poor, beautiful or ugly, our race or our nationality. The first mirror we looked into were the eyes of our mother. The first people to define us were our parents. I was an inconvenient pregnancy to my teenage mother. From the beginning, she let me know that I was putting a crimp in her social life. Some of you had parents who affirmed you, others of you had parents who communicated that you were a disappointment to them. Later, others defined you: brothers, sisters, relatives, children on the playground, and kids in Junior High School. The world is full of mirrors, all reflecting back to you different images of who you are. And most of them are flawed, if not false. We set ourselves up for heartache when we let the people of this world define us.

Almost everyone is a funhouse mirror, like the optically-altered mirrors at an amusement park. You stand in front of one and you are eight feet tall, and six-inches wide. Stand in front of another and you are two feet high and fat as a house. You laugh because you know the joke is on you. But it's not so funny when you stand in front of people who are flawed by sin, and twisted by their experiences in this world. The feedback they give you is as flawed as the funhouse mirror. And here's the real tragedy: after being defined by a world of funhouse mirrors, you become a funhouse mirror yourself. Ultimately, you can't trust what others say about you or what you think about yourself. That's what's behind St. John's words: "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." I took me years to figure out, that God alone

defines who I am. If I spend my life trying to get others to reflect back to me what I want to see, I will become a frustrated and perfectionistic people pleaser. I will never become a holy person who pleases God.

4. We need to become all we already are.

St. John gives us this hope in verse two: “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.” St. John tells us that none of us can predict our future. 2010 and beyond is shrouded in mystery. But we can know two things: 1) We are *now* children of God; and, 2) When we see him, we will be just like our heavenly Father. St. Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror...” Right now we can’t imagine how beautiful we are in God’s image. All the funhouse mirrors, including our own flawed self-image, scream at us that we aren’t good enough, smart enough, successful enough, and worthy enough.

But Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 13:12 to say, “Then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully even as I am fully known.” He is saying exactly what St. John is saying: We are beautiful in God’s sight. We are holy in his sight. We are loved unconditionally in his sight. Neither the world nor we know fully who we are. But when we see him, we will look into the first perfect mirror we have ever seen. And we will a reflection of his face staring back at us. It will be like that famous poster of the little kitty cat looking into a mirror and seeing a lion staring back. One day we little kitties will look like the Lion King, Jesus.

St. John ends by saying in verse three, “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.” God already sees you as pure, because he sees you robed in the purity of his Son. Because of his Son’s perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection, he has declared you to be perfect if you have put your trust in Christ. But you know the truth: you may have been *declared* perfect, but you don’t yet *live* perfect lives.

But you want to be like your heavenly Father. So you will strive to become what you already are in his eyes. At age 12, I wanted to look like, act like, and become everything my new dad Arnold Petterson was. The fisherman called him “Pete.” When they saw dad coming down the dock, with me following behind (dressed just like him, and aping his every move), they would call out to each other, “Here comes Pete and Repeat.” Love is an amazing thing. It will make you want to become just like the one who lavished you with his love!