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Keystone BAPTIST

Official Paper of the Pennsylvania Association of Regular Baptist Churches

Will We Allow 2020 to Increase Our Faith?

By Pastor Donn L. Hauser
Independent Baptist Church, Towanda



The year 2020 is probably a year that most of us would just as soon forget. With the uncertainties of the pandemic, the anarchy of the rioting, the chaos of the election and even into 2021, the destruction at the capitol building in Washington, D.C., it has not been a good year. However, as believers, we know that God still sits on His throne and “ruleth in the kingdom of men” (Daniel 4:17). As God is sovereign, we know that He has a plan and a purpose and that He is working all things together for good. So what good can come out of 2020? Can we become more Christlike because of what we have experienced in 2020? At the Independent Baptist Church in Towanda, we have spent the last few months looking at the life of Abraham and particularly the circumstances of his life which tested his faith. At times Abraham passed the test of his faith with flying colors. Unfortunately, there were a few occasions he failed miserably. By God’s grace, when Abraham failed, he was forgiven and he continued to grow in his faith. Can God use the year 2020 to grow us in our faith?

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He First Loved Us!

By Pastor Drew Fenstermacher
Faith Baptist Church, State College



January first; the first of the year; the first of the month; the first of the week. The first: first place, first to finish, first in one’s class, first in one’s affection. First is a concept of which we are all familiar.

The greatest of all the firsts in this life and the life to come is His first love for us— *“We love Him, because He first loved us.”* I
John 4:19

In what sense is God’s love for us first?

His love is first in the sense of sequence. Before any of us loved Him, God chose to love us. He chose to love us even before He created the heavens and the earth. God speaks of His first love in this way: *“Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore, with lovingkindness have I drawn thee”* (Jeremiah 31:3). He chose to love us as He *“fearfully and wonderfully made us in secret”* (Psalm 139:14-15) in our mother’s

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**All Hands On Deck...
Man Your Battle Stations!**

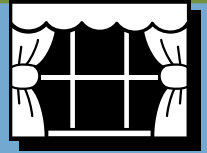
When the enemy is approaching, the alarm starts sounding and you hear the command – “ALL HANDS ON DECK, MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS.” Then there is a rush to assigned positions to be alert and ready to defend against any approaching attack or intrusion.

As our United States Armed Forces are trained to be prepared for any dangerous threat, we as believers and our churches need to be aware of the approaching dangerous threats. Some anti-religious measures had developed eight years ago, but then the Lord gave us a four year reprieve. With the new administration now in power the dangers to religious freedom and to our churches has been reestablished.

I have often wondered how the situations developed in Italy, Germany and Russia decades ago when religion began to be targeted. Jews and Christians were singled out, persecuted, restricted and much, much worse. Well, in our wonderful country – “the land of the Free” – the history books are being rewritten, prayer was taken out of schools (decades ago), babies are being murdered in and outside of the womb, in many places churches are considered “non-essential,” and now free speech is being challenged, limited and filtered “for the good of the country.” There are many reports on what is and what will soon be expected against Christians. A sample of such conservative reporting in most recent days is as follows:

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From the
Parsonage Window



I Love Biscuits

I couldn't resist sharing the following story, which hopefully will give you a laugh -- at least a chuckle. We may even see a few applications to life right now.

A visiting Pastor was attending a men's breakfast in Ohio farm country. He asked one of the impressive older farmers in attendance to say grace that morning. After all were seated, the older farmer began ... “Lord, I hate buttermilk.”

The Pastor opened one eye and wondered to himself where this was going. Then the farmer loudly proclaimed, “Lord, I hate lard.”

Now the Pastor was overly worried. However, without missing a beat, the farmer prayed on, “And Lord, you know I don't care much for raw white flour.”

Just as the Pastor was ready to stand and stop everything, the farmer continued, “But Lord, when you mix ‘em all together and bake ‘em up, I do love fresh biscuits.”

“So Lord, when things come up we don't like, when life gets hard, when we just don't understand what you are sayin' to us, we just need to relax and wait ‘till You are done mix-in', and probably it will be somethin' even better than biscuits.” Amen.



**“The Police State Is Coming For “Religious Extremists”,
“Evangelical Christians”, “Pro-Life” Activists And “Libertarians”
(January 25, 2021 by InvestmentWatchBlog.com)**

“If you cherish faith, family and freedom, you might want to keep a low profile for a while. The Domestic Terrorism Prevention Act of 2021 has been unveiled in Congress, and it has bipartisan support. It is essentially “the Patriot Act on steroids”, and we are being told that it is almost certain that some version of the legislation will make it to Biden’s desk for him to sign. Personally, I am very much against all forms of domestic terrorism, and a law which could help to prevent terror attacks from happening is going to sound like a good thing to a lot of people. Unfortunately, it appears that this bill is meant to specifically target certain groups, and as you read this article you may discover that you are a member of one or more of those groups.

“Those that drafted this new law say that it will help authorities go after “extremists”, and very few of us would consider ourselves to be one of those.

“But the definition of an extremist has changed. Tulsi Gabbard is one of the most prominent Democrats in the House of Representatives, and last year she ran for president. But even though she is a Democrat, she is warning that this new law appears to be “a targeting of almost half of the country”

“What characteristics are we looking for as we are building this profile of a potential extremist, what are we talking about? Religious extremists, are we talking about Christians, evangelical Christians, what is a religious extremist? Is it somebody who is pro-life? Where do you take this?” Gabbard said. She said the proposed legislation could create “a very dangerous undermining of our civil liberties, our freedoms in our Constitution, and a targeting of almost half of the country.” (by Michael Snyder)

There is great comfort in knowing that our loving Lord will be with us no matter what we must face. In the Gospel of Mark 4:35-41: [35] *“And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side.*

[36] *And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships.*

[37] *And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full.*

[38] *And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?*

[39] *And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.*

[40] *And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?*

[41] *And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”*

In fact, the martyrs in Roman times, brothers and sisters in Christ behind the Iron Curtain and the Bamboo Curtain of Communism must have gleaned much comfort from Isaiah 43:1 [1] *“But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.*

[2] *When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee”*

Yes, there is a storm, a trial, a battle coming and it may become very intense, BUT let us not be overtaken in fear – you see – Jesus is in the boat with us. Doesn't matter how bad the storm, how hard the trial or how intense and costly the battle He is in the boat, Jesus is With us!

There are individuals now in key positions with a resentment or outright hatred of the Bible and Christians that uphold the Word of God. These individuals are joining their forces to target us and religion in general.

- If you believe that ALL have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God
- If you believe that the only way to salvation is through the Son of God Jesus Christ
- If you profess Jesus Christ as your personal Savior
- If you do not want to forsake the assembling of yourselves together for worship
- If you believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God
- If you believe in the Sanctity of Life
- If you believe that God created us man & woman
- If you believe Marriage is between one man and one woman
- If you believe in the power in prayer to the marvelous Throne of Grace

Then get ready, prepare for battle, because the enemy is approaching seeking whom they may devour. Always remember Jesus is with us as we get ALL HANDS ON DECK – MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS!!!!!!!!!!.



Churches Searching for Pastor

As of February 2021

First Baptist Church – Corry
 Springside Baptist Church Distant (New Bethlehem)
 Grace Baptist Church – Hazleton
 First Baptist Church – Roulette
 Carmel Baptist Church – Saegertown
 Tidioute Baptist Church – Tidioute
 Calvary Baptist Church – Union City



Next Town Evangelism – Faith Baptist Church, Bradford

Pray for Pastor Gary Smith as he is in need of PARBC Churches supporting him and thus be able to receive matching funds from the PARBC for his support in his effort to rescue/build back up FBC, especially with the difficulties of the pandemic.

2021-22 Activities for Our Fellowship

Coming Activities for Our Fellowship

Spring Conference – April 12-13, 2021

First Baptist Church of Ogden, Boothwyn
 Hosts: Pastor Dan Hicks & Congregation
 Speaker: Dr. Marty Marriott
 Maranatha University

Youth Retreat and Talents for Christ

Calvary Baptist Church, Bloomsburg
******Date: April 30-May 1, 2021******
 See www.parbc.org (Teen Activities)

Fall Conference – September 13-15, 2021

Hope Baptist Church, Hanover
 Hosts: Pastor Allen G. Harris & Congregation

Spring Conference – April 25 & 26, 2022

Grace Baptist Church, Kittanning
 Hosts: Pastor Nathan S. Bramlet & Congregation

TALENTS FOR CHRIST CATEGORIES

Calvary Baptist Church, Bloomsburg, PA April 30-May 1, 2021

- Extemporaneous Writing
- Bible Knowledge: Old & New Testament
- Art: 2-Dimensional, 3-Dimensional
- Photography
- Home Economics: Baking, Needlework/Handiwork, Sewing
- Bible Quizzing Team
- Vocal
 - Male & Female Solos
 - Large & Small Group
 - Instrumental*
 - Brass: Cornet, Trumpet, French Horn, Trombone, Baritone, Tuba, Sousaphone
 - Strings: Violin, Viola, Cello, Bass, Classical Guitar, Folk Strings
 - Woodwinds: Bassoon, Oboe, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Alto Saxophone, Tenor Saxophone, Flute
 - Piano
 - Large & Small Group
 - Speech
 - Oral Interpretation
 - Public Speaking: Male & Female
 - Visualized Bible Teaching
 - Puppetry
 - Digital Media
 - Digital Presentation

*Exceptions can be made to these categories and instruments with prior approval from the Talents for Christ Committee.

DEADLINE FOR REGISTRATION IS APRIL 12th

Our PARBC Council of Ten

Dr. Charles Dear – **Chairman** - - term ends 2021
Crescentville Baptist Church, Philadelphia

Dr. Allen G. Harris - **Vice Chair** - term expires 2022
Hope Baptist Church, Hanover

Rev. Gary Smith – **Secretary** - - term ends 2021
Faith Baptist Church, Bradford

Dr. Earl Shawley – **Treasurer** - - - - -
Messiah Baptist Church, Kylertown

Rev, Randy Boston - - term ends 2022
Bible Baptist Church, Shickshinny

Rev. Joshua Franklin - - term ends 2022
Open Door Baptist Church, Greensburg

Rev. Tom Harris - - - - - term ends 2022
Bible Baptist Church , Quakertown

Rev. Jonathan Hill - - - - term ends 2021
Union Baptist Church, Kittanning

Rev. Jeff Kistler -- - - - - term ends 2021
Middletown Road Baptist Church, Pittsburgh

Rev. Steve Lyon - - - - - term ends 2021
Bible Baptist Church, Upper Darby

Rev. Keith Williams - - - - - term ends 2022
Marsh Creek Fellowship Baptist Church, Wellsboro



Rev. Dr. Richard Allen Harris Home in Glory



Dr. Richard Allen Harris went home to be with his Lord on Thursday, January 14, 2021, after serving as a pastor and teacher to hundreds for over 60 years. He was known for his love of the Scriptures, his love for his people, and his desire to share the love of Christ and the gospel message with others. He is remembered as a great Bible teacher, a leader in the state of Pennsylvania and in the nation for promoting Christian Education and the preservation of the founding principles upon which the United States was founded.

He was born in Doylestown, PA, to Olin and Flora Harris, the seventh child out of eight. After graduating from Central Bucks High School, Doylestown, PA, he married his sweetheart Erla Pauline (Duckworth) Harris. They were married 68 years. The Harrises had six children: Barbara Ann (Harris) Peev, Richard Dwight Harris (deceased), Dr. Allen Gene Harris, Melvin Paul Harris, Cynthia Pauline (Harris) VanOsten and Rebecca Faye (Harris) Frederick.

He attended Bob Jones University, Greenville, SC. He then attended 'Faith Theological Seminary' in pursuit of his Masters degree. While pursuing his Masters, he accepted an interim position at a 'One-room school house' where the First Baptist Church of Perkasie was holding a Sunday School ministry in Rockhill Township, Sellersville, PA. From the Sunday School, Dr. Harris and several families started an independent Baptist Church.

The church, Bethel Baptist Church, was constituted on October 31, 1962, with 14 families. Ultimately, Bethel would have a membership of over 1,000. In 1967, convicted about the need for Christian, Bible-based education for children, Dr. Harris led Bethel to start Upper Bucks Christian School. From the one-room schoolhouse, which still stands today, Bethel's campus now covers over 22 acres in Sellersville, PA. Hundreds have graduated from Upper Bucks and are serving in a myriad of ministries and vocations around the world.

Dr. Harris co-founded KCEA (Keystone Christian Education Association) to support Christian Schools across the state of Pennsylvania. He also co-founded the Independent Baptist Fellowship of North America (IBFNA), served on the Council of ten for the Pennsylvania Association of Regular Baptist Churches, (PARBC) was a leader in the American Association of Christian Schools, was a director in the American Council of Christian Churches (AACCS), and directed the Grace Independent Baptist Mission, (GIBM), with missionaries in over 20 countries.

Dr. Harris was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Hyles-Anderson College, Crown Point, Indiana. He also received the "Defense of the Scriptures" Memorial Award from Bob Jones University and the "Faithful Servant Award" from the Pennsylvania Association of Regular Baptist Churches.

In 2000, he retired from Bethel Baptist Church. Since then he helped four other churches; Bible Baptist Church of West Chester, PA; Kendall Park Baptist of Kendall Park NJ; First Baptist Church of Oxford PA; Shickshinny Baptist Church of Shickshinny, PA; and Dr. Harris recently helped constitute "Bible Baptist Church of Quakertown," PA.

His ministry in the Word of God, his great love of souls and burden to share the Gospel of Christ, his wisdom and influence on so very many of us and his example of a faithful servant for so many years are deeply missed, but we rejoice in his promotion to Glory to see his Savior face to face.

As American Christians, I am not sure we have really learned to trust God. With our wealth and our health care system and our freedom and our stable government, we really have not had to trust God. We do not have to trust God for our next meal. Most of us probably have enough food in our freezers and our pantries to last us for months. We do not have to trust God for our retirement. We have our 401K's. We do not have to trust God for our health. We have the best health care system in the world. We do not have to trust God in the face of persecution. We exercise our freedom of religion without government officials threatening us. We do not have to trust God sitting on His throne. We have a stable government where there has been a smooth transition of power for over 200 years. In the year 2020 a lot of that changed. All of a sudden there was a pandemic and a disease that no health care system could stop. The economy took a nose dive and millions faced unemployment and businesses closed. The election and subsequent actions threatened our stable government. And speaking of our government, as our government officials ordered shutdowns, at times it seemed as though they were specifically targeting churches and infringing on our religious freedoms. Many of us Christians have not responded well to all of this because we found ourselves in a place where we had to trust God and really did not know how to do so because we have never really learned to do so.

I believe a study of the life of Abraham and his tests of faith can be helpful. The first test of Abraham's faith was The Provision of Faith test in Genesis 12. God had promised to Abraham and his seed the land of Canaan. From that time on it became the Promised Land. Shortly after God promised this land to Abraham, a famine arose in the land. Would God provide for Abraham in the Promised Land? Due to a lack of faith, Abraham's answer was no, and he and Sarah went down to Egypt against God's will. He did not trust in the provision of God. Are we trusting in God's provision in these uncertain times?

As we come to Genesis 13, we see The Humility of Faith test. Abraham and his nephew Lot had become so wealthy in cattle and herds and flocks that the land could not sustain both of them. It became necessary for them to separate. Abraham, being the uncle of Lot, according to custom, certainly had the right to choose what land he wanted and what would be best for him. But in humility, Abraham allowed Lot to choose what land he wanted. Lot, of course chose the best and most fertile plain for himself, leaving the hill country for Abraham. Abraham exercised the humility of faith as he humbled himself, first before God, and then before his nephew Lot. He had learned his lesson that God would provide in the Promised Land regardless of what Lot would choose. Do we have that same humility of faith which allows others to make choices that directly affect us?

As we continue in the life of Abraham, we arrive in Genesis 14 where we read that a confederacy of four kings made war with a confederacy of five kings. The confederacy of five kings was made up of the five kings of the five cities in the plain of Jordan where Lot was dwelling. Specifically, Lot had chosen to live in the wicked city of Sodom. The four king confederacy defeated the five king confederacy and took captive the inhabitants of Sodom, including Lot. This is where we see The Boldness of Faith tested. What would Abraham do? He responded with boldness and gathered all of his servants and herdsman and pursued after the four king confederacy. God gave him victory and he delivered Lot. He also brought back all of the spoils

to the city of Sodom. The king of Sodom offered all of the spoils to Abraham, but Abraham refused the offer. He boldly proclaimed, "...I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and I will not take anything that is thine, lest you shouldest say, I have made Abraham rich:" (Genesis 14:23). Once again, Abraham would trust God and not man to provide for him. As American Christians, have we put too much trust in man? Will we boldly proclaim before man our faith in God to provide and follow up that proclamation with action? In Genesis 15:1, God assures Abraham that choice as God says, I am your shield and great reward."

Unfortunately, had grown in faith, as Genesis 16, he fails The test. Abraham and dwelling in the land years and God had still not fulfilled a son. Sarah was now 75 years old. Lacking patience to longer, they decided into their own hands Abraham took Sarah's his wife and to have

That, of course, turned out to be disastrous and we are living yet today with the consequences of Abraham's sin and his lack of patience. I believe as 2020 dragged on, many of us failed because of a lack of patience, becoming fearful and/or angry and taking matters into our own hands.

At the end of Genesis 16, Abraham was 86 years old. At the beginning of Genesis 17, Abraham is 99 years old. From what we can tell from scripture, after Abraham's failure in The Patience of Faith test, God was silent for 13 years. Do you think God was maybe teaching Abraham patience? When God does appear to Abraham, He identifies Himself as Almighty God, El Shaddai. The Hebrew word "shaddai" refers to power and sufficiency. After 13 years, as Abraham is now 99 years old, God reassures him that even now His power is sufficient to fulfill His promise and that Abraham would have a son with Sarah. At the time of Genesis 17, we see Abraham passing The Obedience of Faith test as he circumcises all the males of his house, including himself and Ishmael. God had commanded Abraham to do this as a sign of the covenant God had made with Abraham. In obeying this command, Abraham was expressing his faith in God's promise of a son as part of the Abrahamic Covenant. Do we have the faith to obey God in every and all circumstances?

In Genesis 18, God tells Abraham that he is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. This is The Compassion of Faith test. What would be Abraham's response to this news? I am afraid that the response of many of us Christians would be, "Go get

**We cannot
presume to know
the mind of God
when it comes to
how He runs
His universe.**

he made the right
"Fear not, Abram,
thy exceeding

though Abraham
we come to Gen-
Patience of Faith
Sarah had been
of Canaan for 10

filled the promise
barren and she
Abraham was 85.
wait on God any
to take matters
and help God out.
maid, Hagar, to be
a child with her.

them, God, those wicked sinners deserve destruction. And if there are any righteous in the cities, those compromising believers deserve it too!” Abraham’s response was quite different. Out of a compassion for the unbelieving sinners and the compromising believers, Abraham interceded before God on their behalf. He had a compassion for the souls of the Sodomites. We are living in a time in which if you disagree with me as it relates to politics or COVID-19 masks and mitigations, then you are dangerous and must be destroyed. Do you think God would be well pleased if instead we decided to pray for one another? Maybe out of compassion, we should intercede before God on behalf of those who disagree with us instead of spewing out our anger on social media.

Genesis 20 relates to us a lapse in Abraham’s faith as he fails yet another test, The Protection of Faith test. Abraham decides to go down to Gerar and to dwell there. Fearing that the king of Gerar would kill him and take his wife, Sarah, for himself, Abraham lied and said that Sarah was his sister. Abraham defended himself by saying that she actually was his half-sister. But it was a lie told in order to deceive because he lacked faith in the protection of God. It is so easy, especially in difficult times, to lie and deceive in order to protect ourselves rather than to trust God to protect us. Not that we should not be wise and follow the mitigations concerning COVID-19, but where is our trust? If we are trusting in the mitigations rather than trusting God for protection, it is a misplaced trust.

Of course, the ultimate test of faith for Abraham is found in Genesis 22. It is here where we see The Sacrifice of Faith test. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the one through whom God promised to fulfill His covenant. Abraham had grown in his faith to the point that he would obey God, believing “...that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead” (Hebrews 11:19). He had come to trust in El Shaddai, the Almighty God whose power was sufficient to fulfill His promise. If God promised that the covenant would be fulfilled in Isaac then that is what God would do. Abraham knew that he could trust God even if he in obedience sacrificed his son. God, of course, spared Isaac and provided a substitute ram caught in the thicket. Do we trust God to the point of sacrificing our possessions, comforts and position, our very lives, in order to obey Him? Do I consider what I have, and even my life, expendable if the goal to be reached is the glory of God?

We cannot presume to know the mind of God when it comes to how He runs His universe. We cannot answer with any specifics why God allowed all the events of 2020. We know He works all things together for good and for His glory. We can also say that God allowed the events of 2020, at least in part, to grow us in our faith. Are we willing to humble ourselves and admit that our faith is often weak and needs to grow? May our prayer be that of the disciples, “...Lord, Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5).



womb. He chose to love us even when we manifested vile and repugnant hatred toward Him *“in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). His love for us predates our love for Him providing the cause and condition of our response of love for Him.

His love is also first in the sense of plan of action. *“According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will”* (Ephesians 1:4-5). God’s “plan of action” to adopt us into His family has many steps: The Messianic prophecies of long ago; the virgin birth and sinless life of the Lord Jesus Christ; the death-burial-resurrection-ascension of the Messiah Savior Lord; the pouring out of the gift of God the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost; the preaching of the Gospel of Christ; and, the conviction of sin, repentance and confession of the Lord Jesus Christ as one’s personal Savior. His plan is clearly revealed in the written word of God that leads us to faith and life in the living word of God: God the Son, Jesus Christ (see John 5:39-40). His plan is motivated by and is the manifestation of His first love toward us.

God’s love is first in the sense of initiative. He acted and acts first in His love for us. *“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). *“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins”* (I John 4:10). By way of personal testimony, He sought me; I did not seek Him. I had a veneer of Christianity having been raised in a Christian home setting, yet I was spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1), worshipping and serving the creature, myself (Romans 1:25)! I had finished high school and had begun the fall semester of my freshman year in college when the Lord Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the word of God convicted me of my sin and my need of Him- the Savior. He opened the eyes of my heart to faith and life in the Lord Jesus Christ. How thankful I am that He loved me first- not only on that day, but every day since then! The words of eighty-two year old John Newton, “My memory is nearly gone but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner – and that Christ is a great Savior,” resonate within my soul all because of His first love for me!

His love is first in the sense of quality. It is of the highest quality because of its sacred nature. The God who is love (I John 4:8) is also the God who is light (I John 1:5). He, *“the LORD God of hosts (YHWH-Sabaoth) is holy, holy, holy”* (Isaiah 6:3). His love for us is wholly pure and good. It is of the highest quality because of its sacrificial nature. God the Father *“gave His only begotten Son”* (John 3:16). The Son of God, the Good Shepherd, gave His life for the sheep (John 10:11). While being mocked, rejected and despised, the only begotten Son gave His life for us that we would become beloved children of God through faith in Him. God’s love is of the highest quality because of its satisfying nature. He is the lover of my soul; my soul finds rest in Him (Psalm 116:7). Hudson Taylor’s favorite hymn speaks of this truth: *“Jesus, I am resting, resting, in the joy of what Thou art; I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart.”*

God’s love is first in the sense of finality. From eternity past to eternity future God loves us. The Hebrew word translated “lovingkindness” (at times, “mercy”) is the word “chesed.” It has the sense of faithful, long-lasting love. It is a love that endures the ever-changing circumstances of this sojourn, a love that is committed and constant, sure and steady, true and trustworthy. The Psalmist declares, *“His mercy (that is, His faithful, committed lovingkindness) is everlasting”* (Psalm 100:5). Our love for Him is fragile; His love for us is firm and foundational. Our love for Him is easily colored by our circumstances; His love for us is constant, flowing from His character. Our love for Him is weak and feeble; His love for us is strong and strengthens our assurance in Him as Paul writes, *“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”* (Romans 8:38-39).

His first love for us moves our soul to “love Him”- “*we love Him because He first loved us*” (I John 4:19). His love for us is shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Spirit at the moment of the new birth (Romans 5:5) liberating our hearts to love Him. Once we were “*haters of God*” (Romans 1:30); now we love the One who first loved us. His love is of the highest preciousness to us (Psalm 36:7). It moves our hearts to sing beautiful words such as “I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and His glory, of Jesus and His love!”

His first love for us captures our whole being to live for the Lord Jesus Christ, who died and rose again on our behalf. Paul wrote of the reality of the constraining love of Christ testifying, “*For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again*” (II Corinthians 5:14-15).

His first love captured the heart of John G. Paton who devotedly witnessed of Christ on the island of Tanna in the New Hebrides (currently Vanuatu). He did so even while grieving the loss of his young wife, Mary, and, less than a month later, their newborn and only son, Peter. John buried both his wife and son with his own hands. Their gravesite became hallowed ground as John poured out his soul to the One who first loved Him; there he found renewed strength to love and serve Him in the Gospel ministry.

It captured the heart of Charles Haddon Spurgeon to faithfully preach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ enduring much in the way of trial and heartache. Spurgeon knew the pain of physical affliction, especially suffering from gout the last twenty-two years of his life. He knew the turmoil of persecution not only from unbelievers but also from those who bore the name “Christian” who derided him for his Calvinism and his fight for doctrinal purity during the “Downgrade Controversy” in the Baptist Union. He knew lasting emotional heartache from the memory of seven people being trampled to death on the occasion of someone shouting, “Fire!” while Spurgeon was preaching to a large congregation in the Music Hall of the Royal Surrey Gardens. Perhaps the deepest arrow in his heart was that of seeing his dear wife, Susannah, endure debilitating physical affliction for the last twenty-four years of their marriage. Through it all, he persevered being moved by the Lord’s first love for him!

God’s first love for us is sure, steadfast and certain. What of our love for Him in 2021? How will we manifest our love for Him in 2021? An essential way is by loving our brother. “*Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another*” (I John 4:11). “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he *hath seen*, how can he love God whom he *hath not seen*? And this commandment have we from Him, that he who loveth God love his brother also” (I John 4:20-21). I close with one of the greatest demonstrations of such love that I have ever read about. It comes from the biography on Robert T. Ketcham, Portrait of Obedience, by J. Murray Murdoch (see chapters 16-18). Ketcham had received a barrage of vicious attacks, both private and public, from a fellow pastor. These attacks reached a zenith of viciousness when this man attacked Ketcham’s integrity regarding his daughter and her husband while his daughter was near death with the tropical disease of beriberi. In the flesh, Bob Ketcham, was overcome with a burning hatred for his fellow pastor. But with great courage, he determined to manifest the love of Christ toward that brother. He got alone with God and poured out his soul until he found enablement in the Lord to “pray in love for J. Frank Norris” (Ibid. page 187). Such is a man who loves the God who first loved him by loving his brother in Christ- a fellow child of God.

“We love Him, because He first loved us.” His first love for us moves us to love Him and to love our brethren as well!