Series Road Map

**Series Overview:** How we engage with God is a direct reflection of what we think about God. Unfortunately we often forget just how incredible God is and as a result, we feel apathetic in our faith or unimpressed at best. This series is designed to reengage our imagination and our faith. By reminding ourselves of God’s incredible creativity, His amazing power, and unconditional love, we set ourselves up to sit in wonder and fall in love with God (again).

**Week Overview:** This week we’ll put some handles on the depth of God’s love. The teaching will end with a gospel presentation.

**Grab the Room (Intro):** Story of love at first sight

**Tension (whats the struggle):** We can’t even imagine the depth of God’s love for us

**Text (+ Supporting Text):** John 18:36, Matthew 23:39-43, Luke 22:59-62, John 21:17

**THP**:  God’s love is so much greater than you can even imagine

**Application (call to action)**:  Gospel Presentation & Worship

Scripture - highlighted yellow

Illustration/Video/Object Lesson

Personal Story

Have you ever been surprised by love? Boy, sometimes it can really catch you off guard.

*Personal, lighthearted story of being surprised by love…*I was once surprised by love. And it wasn’t love for my parents. It wasn’t love for my kids. It wasn’t even love for my wife. It was a warm day in May of 2021. I was shopping with my wife, my two boys, and my niece. We were just leaving Kohls and getting ready to head to Target. But before we made it to the car, someone had the bright idea of stopping by the pet store, just a couple doors down. I was not prepared for what would happen there that day. We stopped at the very front of the store where the cats were. Well cats are dumb, so I wasn’t even tempted to pet one. We left there and headed to the guinea pigs. Two of them were hairless. Have you ever seen a hairless guinea pig? Not pretty. But we stopped and looked while my wife told stories of growing up and her guinea pig, may she rest in peace. Her guinea pig was cooked when Megan’s house caught on fire. We wandered on and began looking at the snakes and lizards. Lizards I don’t mind, but snakes are even worse than cats. So I was only so happy to leave them. And that’s when it happened. I was walking out of the snake aisle when I stopped in my tracks. I clutched my heart, hoping that it would eventually begin beating again. 20 feet in front of me, with the dark brown eyes and smashed-in face of pure beauty was the most glorious dog I’d ever seen in my life being walked by an owner who did not deserve that precious baby angel. The owner told me he was a two-month-old English Bulldog named Rhino. In a moment, we connected. Love hasn’t been so instantaneous since Forrest Gump met Jenny on the school bus. I played with Rhino for a few minutes. After that he wouldn’t leave me, no matter how much his owner tried to call him away. For the next 10 minutes, my family conspired a dozen different ways to steal the dog. We had to leave fast because with each minute I grew more and more serious about it. I’ll never forget that dog. I wonder what he’s doing now…

In this series Wonder, we’ve been looking at how amazing God is. How we so often forget just how big and powerful and creative and present and gracious He really is. And tonight, we’re looking at God’s love for us. We’ll try to wrap our minds around just how much He loves us. But fair warning: we’re going to fall embarrassingly short. Because the truth is *THP GOD’S LOVE IS SO MUCH GREATER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!*

And to help us dig deeper into God’s love for us we’re going to look at four stories. Four stories in the Bible of four people’s interactions with Jesus. Four interactions with Jesus during his final days. Four people that came face to face with God’s incredible, unearned, and unexpected love.

Jesus is arrested by the religious rulers. They hate Jesus because he claimed to be God. So they conspire against him by making up false accusations and arresting him in the middle of the night, outside of the city where people could see. They bring Jesus before Pontius Pilate, the Roman official governing Jerusalem. Pilate sees that this is bogus and takes Jesus to the side to ask if he really is the King of the Jews. Jesus responds, “My Kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from this world.” John 18:36 Pilate returns to the crowd and says that he finds no guilt in Jesus. Then inspiration hits him. It’s almost Passover and it was customary to release a prisoner to the people in honor of a holy day. So, Pilate offers the people the chance to free one of two people: Jesus or this other fella Barabbas. Barabbas was in prison for murder and attempting to violently overthrow the government. He was violent, hated, and most of all: guilty.

So, Pilate offers to release one man: Barabbas or Jesus. Picture it. Just picture this moment. On one side, you have Barabbas – a criminal, hated by the community, guilty of murder, arrogant, unrepentant, and evil. On the other side you have Jesus – who teaches love, who is tender and accepting of children, who befriends the lonely, who restores the standing of the outcast, who heals the sick, who gives sight to blind, who feeds the hungry, and makes the lame walk again!

And the crowd chooses Barabbas. In this moment, a Heavenly uprising could have begun. Jesus could have resisted his captors. His angels could have swept in to aid him. Jesus could have walked away the innocent man that he was. But he didn’t. He stood silent. Because Jesus knew that in order for the Father to treat Barabbas like Jesus, He would have to treat Jesus like Barabbas.

And so, while Barabbas is freed to go on and live his life, Jesus was sent to be mocked, brutally beaten, and crucified like a criminal. And with that, we catch a glimpse of god’s love and discover that *THP GOD’S LOVE IS SO MUCH GREATER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!*

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After Jesus is beaten, he is hung naked and bloody on the cross. Beside him on their own crosses are two criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Matthew 23:39-42 One of the criminals who hung their hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Who was this man that God should forgive him? He was a criminal – a bad man. Even he agreed that his death penalty was a fair judgement! This wasn’t just a petty thief, this was a man who had hurt people deeply! And why should he be forgiven? He can’t make good for all the bad he’d done. He couldn’t turn his life around. He’s at the end! This is it! And who even knows his heart. Maybe he’s just saying it to get into Heaven. He probably is saying it just to get into Heaven.

Matthew 23:43 Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” There’s no record of Jesus putting him under a microscope to be sure he meant what he said. There’s no mention of Jesus telling the man what it means to follow him. There’s no tearful apology, no record of wrongs, not even a conversation about guilt and sin. There’s just an overwhelming outpouring of love that proclaims this criminal to be free of sin and a secure future with Jesus in paradise!

It’s not fair! It’s not just! But that’s grace! That God would pardon our sin. When we can’t earn it, pay it back, or even pretend it’s justified. *THP GOD’S LOVE IS SO MUCH GREATER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!*

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With his dying breaths, Jesus asks the Father to forgive those who are crucifying him. He musters up just enough strength to proclaim his work on earth finished and he dies. And with his death, he takes the sins of the world – past, present, and future – and pays the cost with his own life. The sin that covered the thief on the cross, the sin of every human for all of time, is forgiven. The debt is paid. Not canceled, not waived, paid by the innocent blood of Jesus Christ.

Three days later, Jesus rose back to life, just like he said he would. And the full extent of God’s grace and mercy and love are finally realized. The depth of his power on full display. *THP GOD’S LOVE IS SO MUCH GREATER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!*

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A short while after his death & resurrection, Jesus meets up with his disciples. The disciples had been out fishing all night. As they made their way to shore, Jesus prepared breakfast for them on the beach. That’s when Jesus and Peter finally got to have their heart to heart.

See, just days before, as Jesus was being led in chains to the authorities, Peter kept nearby in the shadows; close enough to see, but far enough to not be in harm’s way. But people kept recognizing him. They asked him, “aren’t you one of the fellas that followed Jesus?” Twice Peter denied it. Luke 22:59-62 About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.”Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.”And he went outside and wept bitterly.

This was Peter! The one Jesus claimed would be the rock upon which the church would be built. The disciple who was the first to recognize that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. The follower who proclaimed his loyalty to Jesus, even unto death! But he failed. He fell short. He got scared, saved his hide, and denied Jesus. And with that memory still fresh in his mind, Peter walks side by side with Jesus on the beach. Jesus looks at Peter and asks, “Peter, do you love me?” Peter responds “Of course I do.” Jesus asks him again, “Peter do you love me?” Peter responds, “Yes, Lord, you know that I do.” John 21:17 Jesus said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

What right did Peter have to have to be associated with Jesus after he betrayed him? What business does he have thinking that he now has any part of the story that God’s playing out? He should be cast aside, given up on, called a lost cause, left behind the way he left Jesus behind. But *THP GOD’S LOVE IS SO MUCH GREATER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!* And out of the depths of his love, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him, once for each time Peter denied him. And with that, he restored this heartbroken failure of a follower. And he didn’t just restore his status, he once again gave him a place in his story! An opportunity to get to the work he was so passionate about before! *THP GOD’S LOVE IS SO MUCH GREATER THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE!*

And then there’s the fourth story. But truthfully, it’s just another one of the three stories from before. This is your story. It’s my story.

Maybe like Barabbas, you’ve lived life on your own terms. You’ve made bad decisions and sinned over and over again with an arrogance that betrays your claims to be a good person. Maybe you find yourself standing opposite of Jesus. You know your sins and you know Jesus’s innocence. But in a gesture of unbelievable love, you are offered the chance to walk away and start new. You didn’t ask for it. You’re not even sure what to do with it. But it’s handed to you free of charge.

Or maybe you’re like the criminal on the cross. You’ve done wrong and know that you’re getting exactly what you deserve. In desperation, you cry out to Jesus and ask for the full measure of his mercy. You look into Jesus’s eyes expecting to see judgement or scorn or maybe just pain. But instead all you see is compassion. And you know that this forgiveness is complete.

Or maybe you’re like Peter. You’ve followed Jesus for a while. You’ve said the prayers, helped the people, and made your repeated claims to follow him. But you messed up. And you didn’t just mess up once. You walked in your sin over and over again. And before you know it, you’re deep in your shame and fearful of your next conversation with God. But instead of judging you, Jesus looks you in the eye and offers a way out. And not just a way out, but a place in God’s plan again!

You have a moment right now. Just like Barabbas, just like the thief, and just like Peter. A moment to look into the face of Jesus and experience a love that is so much greater than you can ever imagine. What will you do now? What conversation do you need to have? How do you need to experience God’s love in this moment? I’m going to lead us in a time of prayer and I encourage you to join me, in whatever way that looks for you. Lets take a moment right now and do some business with God.

[Lead this moment of prayer with three crosses set up in different places in the room, then transition into worship. Maybe “Wonder” by Hillsong performed by our worship team.]