



St. Valentine
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We all love romance. We all love a good love story. I don't know if it is ingrained in us to love romance, or a product of Disney marketing, but it does seem like from an early age we are enamored by a good love story. And a love story which started the keeping of Valentine's Day, now that is a legend worth telling.

The early church was a persecuted church. You might remember from your ancient history that the Romans had a pantheon of gods which they worshipped. They even practiced a strange mix of patriotism and religiosity where once a year they bowed before an image of the current Roman emperor and called him a god. Now the early Christians refused to practice this emperor worship. All they had to do was say, "Caesar is Lord" once a year and their lives would be spared, but the Christians could only say, "Jesus is Lord" and so their Christian faith cost them their lives. This persecution lasted on and off for over three hundred years until Constantine rose to power in about 306 AD. Because of their behavior the Romans had a name they gave to the Christians. The name was "atheist". Today we call a person an atheist who doesn't believe in God, but in those days they called someone an atheist who did not believe in the pantheon of Roman gods.

During this first three hundred years of church history many Christians went to their death for their faith. In fact a new word was coined to describe what was happening in the Roman Empire, the word "martyr". The Greek word which is translated to "bear witness" in our English Bibles is "μαρτυρεω". So many Christians lost their lives bearing witness that this word no longer meant to simply bear witness. Now it meant to die for their faith. This word grew into our English word martyr. There was something very unique about these martyrs, though, which slowly over time was going to change the very heart of Rome. These Christians went to their death praying and forgiving their persecutors. The martyred Christians prayers were beginning to

have a profound effect on their tormentors. Because they didn't hate their jailers and the Roman gladiator who took their lives, but prayed for them, slowly a nation's heart toward Christianity was being changed. Christian martyrs went to their deaths loving their abusers. It was into this world that we first hear the love story of St. Valentine.

I was an adult before I heard the story behind the tradition of giving valentines. In ancient Roman times February 14th was a holiday to honor Juno. Juno was the Queen of the Roman gods and goddesses. The Romans also knew her as the goddess of women and marriage. The following day, February 15th, began the feast of Lupercalia.

The lives of young boys and girls were strictly separate in ancient Rome. However, on February 14th the evening before the festival of Lupercalia the names of Roman girls were written on slips of paper and placed into jars. Each young man would draw a girl's name from the jar and then they would be paired for the duration of the festival. Sometimes the pairing would last an entire year, and often a young couple would fall in love and later marry. This is where our tradition of putting valentines in a box or jar came from.

Under the rule of Emperor Claudius II Rome was involved in many bloody and unpopular campaigns. Claudius the Cruel, as he was sometimes called, was having a difficult time getting soldiers to join his military exploits. He believed the reason was Roman men did not want to leave their loves or their families. As a result Claudius canceled all marriages and engagements in Rome. Like many egotistical Caesars before him Claudius had also outlawed Christianity at this time because he wished to be praised as the one supreme god, the Emperor of Rome. Valentine was a Christian bishop of Interamna, a town about 60 miles north of Rome, during this period of oppression. Bishop Valentine thought that the decrees of Rome were wrong and that people should be free to love God and to marry. Valentine invited the young couples of the area to come see him. When they came, Valentine secretly performed services of matrimony and united the couples.

Valentine was eventually caught and was brought before the emperor. The emperor saw that Valentine had conviction and drive that was unsurpassed among his men. Claudius tried and tried to persuade Valentine to leave Christianity, serve the Roman Empire and the Roman gods. In exchange, Claudius would pardon him and make him one of his allies, with all the power and privilege Claudius could give him. Bishop Valentine held to his faith, though, and did not renounce Christ. Because of this the emperor sentenced him to a three-part execution. First, Valentine would be beaten, then stoned, and finally decapitated.

Valentine tried to stay cheerful as he awaited his execution. Many young people he had tried to help came to the jail to visit him. They threw flowers and notes up to his window. They wanted him to know they believed in the sacredness of married love. One new friend who began to visit Bishop Valentine at this time was Asterious, the blind daughter of his jailer. Being a merciful man Valentine prayed for Asterious' healing and God answered his prayer, and she regained her sight. After the miracle Valentine and Asterious fell in love. On the day he was to die, Valentine wrote Asterious a little note thanking her for her love, loyalty, and friendship. He signed the note, "Love from your Valentine." Even today, this message remains as the motto for our Valentine's Day celebrations. First Valentine was beaten, then he was stoned and at last he was decapitated because he would not renounce Christ and because he believed in the sacredness of married love. Bishop Valentine was martyred on February 14, 270 AD.

Isn't that a great love story? Valentine was able to love his jailor, even seeing the daughter of his jailor healed of her blindness, because God first loved Valentine and filled

Valentine with his love. There is a wonderful passage in the gospel of John which explains how Valentine and the other martyrs of the early church were able to show such love, forgiveness and perseverance when they faced death. Look at John 3:16-21.

16) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17) For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18) Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19) And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. 20) For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21) But whoever does what is true comes in the light so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.

The first thing which stands out about this passage is found in verse 16. God so loved the world that he gave his son Jesus that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. After Bishop Valentine's martyrdom Christians began exchanging valentines as tokens of their love on February 14th. In a very real way we could say that God in love sent Jesus as a valentine to the world so the world would know the love of her creator. The creator of the universe is a highly relational God that longs to know his creation. But like all valentines for his love to be known by us it has to be activated, it must be received. God, like all valentines, sometimes experiences the rejection of his love. God knows that love is not love if it is forced. God truly is a gentleman and will not force his love on us. Remember how young Roman girls allowed their names to be written on slips of paper so they could later be drawn out of a jar by a young man? Those young girls had to be willing to put their names in that jar, so we to must be willing to experience God's love. We must believe in God's valentine the Lord Jesus Christ if we want to experience God's love.

In verse 17 we see that Jesus was not sent to the earth to condemn the world, but to save her. Condemnation has to do with sins not paid for. It is interesting that Jesus did not come to condemn men and women, but John goes on to say in verse 18 that those who do not receive this valentine feel condemned already. They know their works are evil and even though Jesus did not come to condemn them they feel condemnation because of their sins. Look again at verses 18, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

When we accept the gift of God found in Jesus we experience God's forgiveness of our sins. We experience God's rest from feelings of condemnation. Without God's forgiveness we are left with our guilt and the knowledge we deserve God's judgment. In verses 19-20 the gospel writer changes the metaphor he uses to describe Jesus. First Jesus was a gift in verse 16, now John describes Jesus as the light. Look again at verses 19-20, "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed."

Lastly we come to verse 21 which explains how Valentine and the early church martyrs were able to forgive their oppressors. "But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God." Everyone who does a truly good deed is happy to show that the strength to accomplish this deed comes from God. They

don't want to take credit for something only God could do. Those who receive God's valentine, Jesus, are filled with God's love and that love begins to do sacrificial acts just as Jesus would do. Those who reject God's valentine will feel condemnation, not because Jesus came to bring condemnation, but because they feel guilt over their sins. God in love wants us to experience his love and forgiveness; his peace and his rest. Jesus did for us what we were unable to do for ourselves. His sacrificial death on the cross and our faith in that sacrifice secures for us a place at God's side in heaven and enables us to live out our days on earth for the name of Christ. On this Valentine's Day let me encourage you to open your heart to the greatest valentine ever given, the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who believe in him will experience eternal life and will receive the ability to forgive like God forgives.