

“God So Loved the World”

The eleventh in a series of sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 3:16-21; Genesis 22:1-19

Our world and everyone in it has fallen in Adam. We stand condemned and await the sentence of judgment because God is holy and he must punish all sin. Even worse, that same sinfulness which condemns us, distorts our thinking about our sin, guilt, and God’s grace. Because of this, we actually prefer the darkness of unbelief, as we foolishly attempt to hide ourselves and our sin from God. No doubt, we deserve God’s eternal wrath. But God’s holy wrath is not the end of the story. God is also love. The story of redemption repeatedly tells us that God has made gracious covenant promises to his people to save them from their sins, and then at the great climax of redemptive history, God sent his own beloved Son—who is the light of the world—to save us from ourselves, and to deliver us from the wrath of God which is to come. Nowhere is this saving mission of Jesus better summarized than in the words of John 3:16. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

We have now made our way into John 3 and John’s report of Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus. In this chapter we find John 3:16, which, without doubt, is the best known and most widely-quoted verse in all the New Testament. Sadly, John 3:16 also has become a object of ridicule by many of our contemporaries—wrestler Steve Austin comes to mind. And who can forget the rainbow whig of Rollen Stewart, who showed up at every major sporting event throughout the 1970's-80's holding a sign which read “John 3:16” while mugging for the cameras. More importantly, at least in regard to our time and interest, John 3:16 is cited by many of our friends and contemporaries as the supposed biblical death knell to the evil doctrine of the Calvinists, who deny that Jesus died for everyone (“the world”), when John 3:16 explicitly says otherwise. So, there is much to say about this passage, and we best let John the disciple, the author of this text, say it.

Last time we took up the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in the first 15 verses of John chapter 3. Nicodemus was from a prominent Jewish family (the Gurions) and was a noted teacher and member of the Pharisees (even perhaps, a member of the Sanhedrin). An older man well-known to everyone in Jerusalem, Nicodemus approached Jesus at night to ask Jesus about the miracles Jesus had been performing while in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Based on these miracles (John does not give us any specifics other than Jesus driving out the merchants and money changers from the temple courtyard), Nicodemus knew that Jesus must have been sent by God, and that God was with him.

Jesus replies to Nicodemus’ comment by telling him that unless Nicodemus is born again (or from above) by the power of God, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Completely baffled by Jesus’ comment, Nicodemus asks Jesus “how can it be that an old man like himself can enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time?” In verse 5 of John 3 Jesus repeats his statement of verse 3, *“truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God,”* adding the necessity of being born of water and the Spirit to his previous comment. Some have argued that Jesus is referring to baptism (water) which regenerates (spirit). Other have argued that Jesus is referring to natural birth (water—amniotic fluid) followed by a spiritual birth (being born a second time).

As we saw last time, it is much more likely that Jesus is using language taken directly from several Old Testament messianic prophecies regarding the age yet to come (notably Ezekiel 36-37) which speak of

the Holy Spirit giving new life to those whose sins are washed away (water) and whose heart is miraculously changed from a heart of stone into a heart of flesh (spirit). According to the prophets, this miraculous change of the human heart by the Holy Spirit is one of the characteristics of the messianic age. In speaking to Nicodemus as he does, Jesus is reinterpreting several well-known passages which Nicodemus should have understood, but cannot because he has not been given this new birth by God. Who Jesus is, and the nature of his mission remains hidden to Nicodemus. Yet these messianic prophecies are fulfilled and in through the one then speaking to this well-known teacher of Israel.

To put this in theological terms, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that God must act upon him first (by giving him the birth) before Nicodemus can even see (understand) the kingdom of God. Jesus goes on to tell him that flesh gives birth to flesh, but it is God (the Holy Spirit) who gives the new birth. This point had already been established by John in verses 12-13 of the prologue to his gospel when he wrote, “*but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, the gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” As we read throughout John’s Gospel, all those who believe in Jesus receive eternal life. But those who believe do so, only because God supernaturally enables them to do so by granting to them the new birth. This is what we mean when we say regeneration (being born again) precedes faith. We will see this fact restated in a number of ways throughout the Gospel of John.

From verse 9, it is clear that Nicodemus is still completely befuddled. “*Nicodemus said to [Jesus], ‘How can these things be?’*” Nicodemus’ confusion prompts a bit of rebuke from Jesus in verses 10-12. “*Jesus answered him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’*” Nicodemus is a learned Jewish theologian, but he does not grasp the most basic fact of the Gospel. Salvation is of the Lord. God does all the saving. If Nicodemus does not understand the things he has just seen—the miracles Jesus has performed, and the teaching he has heard—how will he understand Jesus when he reveals heavenly things, such as his glory, which is now veiled in human flesh?

In fact, Jesus immediately speaks of these heavenly things in verses 13-15. “*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” The heavenly thing which Nicodemus cannot understand is that Jesus has descended from heaven to reveal the glory of God, by accomplishing the work of redemption which the Father sent him to do.¹ In speaking of this ascension to places above, in John 6:62, Jesus speaks of “*the Son of Man ascending to where he was before,*” which is likely the point of reference here. Throughout eternity past, Jesus was present with the Father (“ascended”) and our Lord participated in the divine glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit before he veiled that glory with human flesh in his incarnation (the point made in John 1:14). And now Jesus has come down from heaven (descended) in his incarnation to reveal God’s glory through his miracles and teaching. Although he is one of Israel’s most learned teachers, Nicodemus cannot make sense of this because he is not born from above.

After speaking of his descent and his ascent to and from heavenly glory with the Father, Jesus speaks of the necessity of his being “lifted up” so that people might believe in him and have eternal life. The incarnation must take place for the kingdom of God to come, and so that eternal life might be given to

¹ Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 135.

those who believe in the Son of Man. But the Son of Man also must be lifted up if this promised salvation is to come to the world. Jesus is referring to another Old Testament passage (Numbers 21:4-9), as in some sense prefiguring his own messianic mission. In Numbers 21 we read of the Israelites, “*from Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.’ Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’ Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.’”*

If the Son of Man is to be glorified and save his people from their sin and rebellion against God, he must be lifted up—a clear reference to the cross. Although we often think that the death of Jesus as the depths of his humiliation, in John’s Gospel Jesus’ suffering and death are the supreme revelation of the glory of God. Just as gazing at the serpent raised upon on pole provided deliverance for the disobedient Israelites, so too, Jesus’ death upon the cross will be the divinely appointed means by which God saves his people from the guilt of their sin. All who look to Jesus on the cross (through faith) will be saved from their sins, and through the eyes of faith, will see beyond the suffering Savior to the very glory of God—i.e., “heavenly things.”² It is in his suffering and dying that Jesus reveals the glory of God.

Therefore, in order for anyone to receive eternal life, as Jesus himself says, they must behold the Son of Man crucified for sinners and believe (i.e., “trust”) in him. But this is something which the flesh (sinful human existence) can never grasp. The Holy Spirit must enable us to believe this by granting to us the new birth which comes through gazing upon this crucified Savior who grants us the new birth, faith, and eternal life. The suffering and dying of Jesus is God’s means of procuring all of these amazing benefits for us. In fact, this is the first article of those heavenly things which Nicodemus cannot possibly understand unless God grant him the new birth and enable him to “see” the kingdom of God. The Son of Man (who was in heaven—in his ascended glory) must descend, take to himself a true human nature, and then be lifted up on the cross to suffer and die for the sins of the world, if any are to be rescued from the wrath of God. Nicodemus must look to Jesus to be delivered from his sins, just as the Israelites looked to the serpent on the pole to be delivered from theirs. But Nicodemus cannot understand why he must do this, nor what any of this has to do with Jesus.

What comes next is bad news for those of you who have red letter Bibles! Verses 16-21 are often assumed to be a continuation of Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus and are taken as words of Jesus. But as here and in verses 31-36, the speaker has ceased speaking (Jesus and then John the Baptist), and John the Disciple (the author of this Gospel) is offering a word of explanation about what Jesus has just told Nicodemus. Therefore, our text (vv. 16-21) is John’s comment on verses 1-15 and is “black letter” (John’s words), not “red letter” (the words of Jesus). We know this to be the case for several reasons. Most important is the fact that Jesus usually identifies himself as the Son of Man, but here Jesus is identified as the “one and only”—a title used of him earlier by John, and not a self-designation of Jesus. Nor does Jesus refer to the Father as *ho theos* (God), but most often as “Father,” a more intimate and personal term. So, what follows Jesus’ discourse with Nicodemus in verses 1-15, is John’s explanatory

² Ridderbos, The Gospel of John, 136-137.

comment about the lifting up of the Son of Man in verses 16-21.³

The beloved verse 16 of John 3 is John's explanation of Jesus' reference to Numbers 21 and our Lord's comment to Nicodemus "*so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" If the new birth, faith, and eternal life, come about only through the lifting up of the Son of Man (the preaching of the cross of Jesus Christ—Jesus suffering in the place of sinners), then the ground of Jesus' being lifted up is the love of God. It is here that we discover what John meant in his earlier comparison between Jesus and Moses (John 1:17). "*For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*" The lifting up of the crucified Savior is the supreme revelation of God's grace and truth. Here is where we see the love of God—a suffering savior hanging on a cross.

Jesus came to earth in his incarnation and was lifted up in his suffering and death because God loved the world. The fact that God gave his "one and only son" emphasizes the depths and intensity of God's love for the world.⁴ Paul makes this same point in Romans 8:32 when he writes, "*he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*" John's reference to God's one and only son is also the point of another famous Old Testament passage with which John's readers (and Nicodemus) would also be well familiar—Genesis 22:1-19 (our Old Testament lesson) when God commands Abraham to offer up his only son (Issac) and at the last possible moment provides a ram as the sacrifice for sin instead of Abraham's beloved son. The Lord will provide! God will give up his one and only son because he loves the world.

It is important (and indeed vital) that we understand why Jesus suffered and died, and what his cross means in terms of how God accomplishes our salvation (the Christian doctrine of the atonement). But while we are thinking about these matters, we must never lose sight of the fact that the New Testament repeatedly grounds our salvation in God's limitless love for his people. The Bible never even remotely hints at the fact that we are worth saving—in fact, as we will see shortly, we all stand condemned, and God could have left us under condemnation and remain perfectly just in doing nothing further to save us. But as John reminds us, "*for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" That the love of God is the ground of our salvation is found elsewhere in John's writings, as John tells us in his first epistle, "*in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*"

John's emphasis upon God's love for the world clearly stands out in verse 16. Nicodemus (and John's Jewish readers) would have understood God's love for Israel. But John makes sure that those reading about the lifting up of the crucified Son of Man understand that in Jesus' death for sinners we see God's love for the entire world (not just Israel). God's love has no racial limits—it extends to the distant ends of the earth beyond Israel to every race, tribe and tongue under heaven.

It is equally important to notice that the world is not deserving of God's love (in the sense of being lovable). The *kosmos* is the realm of darkness, a realm of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness because their deeds are evil. The world which God loves enough to send his son to save it is a fallen world in open rebellion against him. It is out of the midst this fallen world that Jesus tells his disciples in John 15:19, "*if you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because*

³ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 203-204.

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 204.

*you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”*⁵ The only reason why the world is not condemned is because God is love. God will save his people, those whom he chooses to save “out of the world” which is already under judgment. And only those he chooses will be born again, believe in Jesus, and be given eternal life.

Therefore, the only reason why anyone is saved out of this fallen and sinful world is because God lovingly and sovereignly chooses to save a multitude of elect individuals so vast they cannot be counted. The reader of John’s Gospel cannot possibly miss the point that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but has eternal life. But John also makes plain that those who believe in Jesus can only do so because they have been chosen out of the world, and given the new birth. This mystery of election and God’s sovereign grace is not to be resolved in speculation about the reasons why God would chose one person and not another. The answer we are given is that God chose to save sinful people out of the world who deserve his wrath because he is love. Any theory of the atonement not grounded in God’s love is not a biblical theory of the atonement. Jesus died for sinners because God is love.

Further explaining the mysteries of the heavenly things which Nicodemus could not understand, John goes on to state in verse 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.*” The fact of the matter is that the world was condemned the moment Adam rebelled against God. Jesus did not come to judge the world—although one day (his second advent) he will return in judgment. Rather, Jesus came to be lifted up on the cross, as the revelation of God’s glory, and in accomplishing our salvation, he will demonstrate for all to see God’s love for sinners. Had Jesus not come because of God’s love for sinners, the world would remain as it already was—under the judgment of God with no possible hope of salvation for anyone.

In the synoptic gospels, the coming of the kingdom of God brings salvation for God’s people, but also brings judgment upon all those who prefer the darkness of human sin to the grace and truth revealed in the gospel. Those who believe in Jesus will not be judged. Those who do not believe are already under judgment. This is the point of John’s comment in verse 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.*” Since the world is fallen and already under God’s judgment, when God sends his only Son to save people from their sin and the wrath which is to come, and they reject their only hope of heaven (Jesus), they are, in effect, only compounding their guilt before God and demanding that God judge them based upon their works, their personal righteousness, their social status, the performance of some religious ceremony, etc. And he will. As one commentator puts it, “as with the arrogant critic who mocks a masterpiece, it is not the masterpiece that is condemned, but the critic.”⁶

As we have seen in the prologue, John’s favorite metaphor to describe the human predicament is light and darkness and he returns to these metaphors again in verses 19-21. “*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.*” There are a number of important points found here, so we will look at them closely.

⁵ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 205.

⁶ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 206.

First, the world is already condemned and under judgment—and has been from the time of Adam’s fall until now. So, when light comes into the world (Jesus, in his incarnation) he was neither noticed, nor was he received by his own people (Israel). This echoes what John has told us in verses 9-11 of the prologue of his Gospel. *“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”* Jesus did not come into the world to make everybody savable if only people would believe in him. This is how most people read and understand John 3:16. No, the world was already under judgment and because we are sinful, like Nicodemus, we cannot even see the kingdom of God nor understand heavenly things unless we are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit through the lifting up of Jesus (the preaching of the cross).

Second, John tells us something very important about human sinfulness—it lies deep within and is characteristic of all of us. *“People love darkness rather than light, because our deeds are evil.”* Sinners sin because we want to sin. As fallen in Adam (and therefore guilty for his sin as well as our own actual sins), we are born bent in on ourselves (as Augustine once put it). As John points out, our motives are utterly self-centered and spring from a sense of shame that our conduct is morally offensive to the holy God. *“For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”* Perhaps the greatest sign of the depravity of our own age is that people feel so little shame about deeds of darkness, that evil is done in the open without the slightest sense of that such conduct is evil. Paul speaks to this in Romans 1:32 when he writes that the depths of human sinfulness is seen when people *“know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”* The point is that apart from the work of God’s Spirit we would all choose to remain in darkness and live as though judgment will never come.

Third, those who have been born again, who have believed in Jesus Christ, and who have received eternal life, will discover that their conduct is now different once they have been freed from the darkness of their hearts and rescued from that judgment which is coming upon the world. John says of such people, *“but whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”* The only reason why any one of us is rescued from darkness and does those good works which characterize the light which saves us is because God has chosen us and enabled us to do so. These things are “carried out” in God. Those whose hearts have been changed from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh will come to the light, trust in Jesus Christ, and will indeed do good works as God enables.

Finally, there is only one reason why God sent his Son into the world of darkness to be lifted up on a Roman cross to save us from our sins. God is love. This is what John is getting at when he states that Jesus did not come to judge the world, because he came to a world which already stands condemned. Its inhabitants are all under the sentence of death, awaiting the day upon which the sentence will be executed. All the while the world’s inhabitants seek out the darkness so as to hide themselves from the holy God. We hate the light. We hate the truth. If the truth were known, we hate God. We desire to do what we want, when we want to do it. We want to stand before God in our own righteousness and be accepted. We delude ourselves in thinking that if we ignore him long enough, God will just let us be.

But God is love. Jesus took to himself a true human nature to be lifted up on a cross. He called his disciples to preach and proclaim that message. And when the gospel is proclaimed, God grants the new birth, his people are granted understanding of heavenly things, they believe that Jesus died upon the cross for them, in their place, for their sins. By looking to the Son of Man who has been lifted up (faith), we are granted eternal life. As John so eloquently puts it, *“for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*