



## He Gave His Only Son...

*Series: John – That You May Believe*

John 3:16-21

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We are going to look this morning at one of the most profound texts in all of the Word of God. It is John's commentary, His spirit-inspired reflection on the conversation that took place when Nicodemus came by night to inquire of Jesus. As hard as it may be to do, I want us to read this at face-value. I want us to come at this text without an agenda –without the need to prove the truth of Reformed theology, which is absolutely true and biblical, or to make a failed attempt to try to disprove it. It is rather easy to come to this text and try to prove something rather than to simply let the text speak for itself, but that is what I want us to do this morning. When John wrote these words, they were earth-shattering, momentous and seismic.

To keep these words in context, we need to remember the content of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Remember Nicodemus had come to speak to Jesus and he had probably come with a variety of motives – to discuss religion, maybe to interrogate Jesus, even to offer some kind of religious endorsement from some of the Pharisees, and folding Jesus' ministry into the existing religious structure. This paragon of religion in Israel came as a man who was confident of what he thought he knew of the kingdom of God, confident of what he thought he knew about Jesus, and confident of what he thought he knew about salvation. But in his meeting with Jesus, everything he thought he knew was turned on its head by Christ. In their conversation, Jesus made exceedingly clear that: Nicodemus was a lost man; he was spiritually dead; he did not understand the kingdom of God at all, all of his religion was worthless; he needed to be born again, regenerated by the Holy Spirit if he was to enter the kingdom of God; it was not something he could do, God had to do this for Him and so he was at the mercy of God; he had to be born again so that he could believe in and receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and be forgiven of his sins and enter the kingdom of God.

In particular, Jesus used the illustration of the plague of fiery serpents, the judgment that God had sent upon the nation of Israel when they had rebelled, and complained, and murmured against God's grace and care. It was a story found in Numbers 21. People rebelled. God sent snake. Snakes bit people. God instructed Moses to put an image of a bronze serpent on a pole and place it before the Israelites. In order to be delivered from the physical death that they deserved, the people of Israel had to look to the serpent on a pole and they would have to do two things – they would have to know and believe that it was their sin that caused the problem that was bringing upon them judgment and they would have to look to the serpent that was lifted up on that pole and have faith to believe that the God who declared the pole be set up had power to forgive and to heal.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness to deliver Israel from physical death, so must Jesus Christ be lifted up, lifted up on the cross, so that whoever believes in Him would have eternal life.

It is in this context that Jesus makes His statement in 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.”** (John 3:16, ESV) And the context is vitally important.

In fact, let me give you a better understanding of this verse that will help you to always keep it in context. The word that is translated in English as “so” is the Greek word **“hoo'-to”** which means “in a similar manner” or “in this way.” So a better translation of this verse is, “In this same manner God loved the world and gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Just as God did something to deliver the believing Israelites from physical death, so God has done something to deliver sinners from spiritual death. That's what John is telling us in these verses. So I want us to consider this passage through a series of statements that I will make and then expand and I pray that God will empower and make alive to our hearts today. And the first thing that John means for us to see is that

### **God's Love for the World is Shocking**

When John writes the words -- **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** (John 3:16, ESV) – he is being very deliberate in what he says. Remember that this gospel was written for Jews and

for Gentiles and so when John wrote that “God loved the world,” it was to the Jews a scandalous statement. The Jews were convinced that God loved them. They were His chosen people. They kept the Law—or at least they thought they did. God loved them and they thought that they deserved that love. But for John to say that God loved the world inclusively, that God’s love was not confined to the Jews but extended to Gentiles of every tribe, nation and tongue – that was scandalous. And to the Gentiles, it was amazing.

But there is even more to it than simply the fact that God’s love extended beyond ethnic Jewish lines. When John uses the word “world,” he is speaking of fallen humanity, of humanity in rebellion against God, of humanity, of individual men and women and boys and girls who are at enmity with God and who are under His condemnation for their sin. And more than that, John is including everyone, including the Jews, in that description.

God’s love is a complex and multifaceted thing and there are several aspects and sides to God’s love. There is a love that God the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father. There is the special love that God has for His people, for His elect. There is the love of God that He has for His creation. And there is the love that God has for sinful humanity, the love of compassion, kindness, generosity, and mercy. DA Carson has an excellent little book called, “The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God” that is so helpful in understanding the complexity of God’s love as described in the entirety of Scripture.

But when we read this verse, as shocking as it is, we need to take it face value. John is saying that God loves sinners with a real love. God has real love for this lost, ruined, and guilty world, for a humanity that is filled with fallen, corrupt, defiant, despising, wicked, debauched, vile, degraded, filthy infected sinners – you and me by nature. God loves the world with a real and tangible love that is not influenced from anything outside of Him but that originates in his nature, and in His love for sinners, He sent His Son to die for their sins, if they will repent and believe in Jesus Christ. Look, I know we know that in order for anyone to believe they must be born again by the sovereign grace of God, but that is not what is primarily in view here. What is in view is God’s great expression of love to a sinful race and the invitation to believe in the Son and escape the death and judgment of sin and receive eternal life. The focus is on what God has done and upon human response to His tangible, powerful, weighty expression of love. And the weightiness and gravity of God’s love is seen in the fact that

## God Gave His Son to Die

God gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, to sinners so that Jesus could live a perfect life of righteousness and obedience to God as our representative and so that He pay the guilt and the suffer the wrath that our sins deserve as our substitute on the cross, so he could be “lifted up,” as Jesus said in verse 15.

God did not send His Son into this world simply to show us how to live rightly. He did not die to teach us a lesson about morality. He sent Christ to die in our place and pay the debt of our sin so that God could uphold His justice and holiness, in that our sin was fully paid for, and at the same time forgive sinners. The love of God revealed to the world is not some abstract, vague idea of a general mercy. It is a love that has been manifested in a precious gift. God has given the mightiest evidence of His love toward lost sinners by a gift of supreme value. He has given Christ! God’s saving love comes to this earth in only one way, through only one channel. It is set before men in one special way. It is only through Christ, by Christ, in inseparable connection with the work of Christ. God did not give any created thing for our redemption, though he owns all the treasures in a million galaxies. He gave no created being to be our deliverer... none could suffice. He gave nothing less than His own dear Son and He gave Him not as a great moral teacher or as an example of self-denial and self-sacrifice – He gave Him to **be** a sacrifice.

He gave Him to be a sacrifice for man's sin, and the atonement for man's offence. He gave Him to be delivered for our transgressions, and to die for the ungodly. He gave Him to bear our iniquities, and to suffer for our sins, the just for the unjust. He gave Him to be made a curse for us, that we might be redeemed from the curse of the law. He gave Him, who knew no sin, to be sin for us who knew only sin, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. He gave Him to be the propitiation for our sins. He gave Him to be a ransom for sinners, and to make satisfaction for our inconceivable debt to God by His own precious blood.

God’s love does not overturn justice or overlook sin or eradicate the reality of hell and eternal judgment. Moreover, the primary purpose of the cross is not a means to give us all of

the present, temporal, earthly benefits, desires, success and pleasures that we could desire. That is an Americanized version of the gospel. The main reason, the essential purpose in Christ's coming to earth was to die on the cross in order to rescue sinners who would believe in Christ from eternal judgment. And no one coerced God to do this.

### **The Plan of Salvation Springs From the Heart of God**

The plan of salvation, of the rescue of sinners from the just punishment that we deserve, springs forth from the heart and the love of God. It was the Father, who in His love, sent the Son, gave the Son. God's love is one of compassionate and costly action not empty sentimentality or token promises. God loves the world of sinners, fallen humanity, rebels, defiers of God, despisers of His will, corrupt, wicked, ruined humanity – of which you and I are a part – with a love that moved Him to sacrificial and costly action. The gift of Christ is the result of God's love to the world, and not the cause. JC Ryle explains this well saying, **“To say that God loves us because Christ died for us is wretched theology indeed. But to say that Christ came into the world in consequence (or because of) the love of God is scriptural truth.”** Christ did not die in order to make God love us; He died because of God's love for us.

Listen, don't get this wrong, John 3:16 is not a testimony to our supreme worth but of the character and heart of God. God's love is shocking, stupendous, amazing, glorious, and astounding not because humanity is so good but because we are so bad. Neither is God's love so glorious because the world is so big that it takes a great big love to embrace it all but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and all the more to love it in the way that God has loved it when He gave His Son. Moreover, John 3:16 tells us:

### **There Are Only Two Kinds of People in the World**

There are two, and only two, kinds of people in this world. There are those who believe in the Son and have eternal life and there are those who do not believe and perish. Those who believe have eternal life. What does it mean to believe? What does genuine biblical, believing, genuine faith, entail? Believing in Christ is not just intellectual assent. Believing in

Christ is not merely feeling something about Christ. It is not temporary excitement, or sympathy, or guilt, or warm feelings that don't last.

True belief in Christ is composed of three things – knowledge, assent, and trust. You have to know gospel truth about yourself and Jesus. You have to believe that these things are true. And then you must place your unreserved trust in Jesus Christ as only Savior and Lord. It is the realization that I am a hell-deserving sinner. I have done nothing and can do nothing to make myself acceptable to God. It is to recognize the great judgment that awaits you for your many sins and to throw yourself upon Christ as the only Savior who died for your sin. It is to turn away from sin and rebellion to God, to turn away from self-righteousness, self-justification, self-exalting, and from believing that we can do anything to make ourselves acceptable to God and to throw all of your hope and trust for deliverance and life upon Christ's perfect life and death in your place, and his resurrection from the dead, and to cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness. It is to trust in Christ alone as Savior and Lord and surrender your life to Him as Lord and Master. That is true faith.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. **Whoever** believes in Him, whatever past sin, whatever former life of wickedness, whatever the character, whatever denomination, whatever rebellion, however deep their former hatred of God, no matter how self-satisfied they have been in their own little religion that tells them that they are OK before God – and there are a host of those people – whoever believes in Jesus Christ will not perish but have eternal life.

Real faith is the doorway into eternal life. Eternal life – life with God in heaven; perfect, abundant, joyful, satisfying, real life in God's presence for all of eternity. Charles Spurgeon said, **“Our heaven will be Christ himself, for he gave himself for us. Oh! he is all that we want, all that we wish for! We cannot desire anything greater and better than--to be with Christ, to have Christ, to feed upon Christ, to lie in Christ's bosom, to know the kisses of his mouth, to look at the gleamings of his loving eyes, to hear his loving words, to feel him press us to his heart, and tell us that he has loved us from before the foundation of the world, and given himself for us.”** That is eternal life. But, as you can see, the word “eternal” does not merely signify a length of life but a quality of life, a quality of life that begins at the moment you believe.

Unbelief is the path to eternal death. The unbelieving perish with no hope and without mercy. The idea of the word “perish” is not that you are annihilated or just simply cease to exist or enter into nothingness. There are many who try to comfort themselves with this thought and it is simply not true. Unbelievers **“will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,”** (2 Thessalonians 1:9, ESV) In hell, they will eternally suffer the consequences of sin against a holy God. Those who die in their guilt will suffer eternal punishment in hell because their sin is against an eternally holy God who demands complete justice. There, Jesus said, **“their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”** (Mark 9:48, ESV) Everyone will exist forever – some in the joy of eternal life and others in the hell of eternal death.

### **God Sent His Son Into the World to Save not to Condemn**

John says, **“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. 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.”** (John 3:17–18, ESV) The point John is making is this: God did not need to send His Son into the world to condemn it. It was already condemned by sin, already under His wrath, already perishing. The world of humanity was condemned long before Jesus got here. Jesus did not come into a neutral world in order to save some and to condemn others. He did not come into a world that was neutral and some moved from neutrality to being pro-Jesus and others to being anti-Jesus. He came into a world of condemned sinners to save those who would believe in Him. Not all will be saved, but God’s purpose in sending His Son was to bring salvation to some, to all who will believe. Jesus came to make the guilty, not guilty; the condemned, pardoned; the spiritually dead, eternally alive. God does not own anyone eternal life. Jesus came to accomplish it and offer it to all who will believe, and that some receive Him is all undeserved grace.

### **Still, Christ’s Coming Into the World Inevitably Draws a Line of Division Between Souls**

Think about the sun in all of its glory. The sun shines to bring light, warmth and life to the earth, but the light of the sun invariably casts shadows and reveals reality as it shines. The same is true of the Light of the World who is the Son of God. Christ’s coming reveals reality. It cannot help but do so. John writes in verse 19-21 these sobering words. **“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.”” (John 3:19–21, ESV)***

Remember John is writing these words in retrospect, looking back at what he, himself, witnessed – what happened in Jesus’ day and continues into our own. John saw two responses to the coming of Christ, a line of division drawn throughout fallen humanity.

He saw one group of people who loved the darkness, who loved their sin, who did not want to be exposed as sinners and so who hated Jesus Christ and His light. When Jesus came into the world, He brought in Himself, the truth about all things – the truth about God, the truth about ourselves, the truth about what is good and righteous, the truth about what is sinful and evil, and the truth about the way of salvation. The light of Jesus Christ brings truth.

Those who love their sin, who love the darkness, flee from the light of Christ and hate and reject it. Now there are plenty of unbelievers that would say that isn’t true, that they don’t hate Jesus but that they are merely indifferent. But listen, that is not what John says and we need to learn to see and define things in the way that the Bible does. Sin is far deeper than outward deeds; it is a matter of the heart, of affections and desires. The problem with man, John says, is that by nature we love our sin and hate God. And the reason that is so is because the light of Christ exposes our sin. The sinful world hates Christ, hates God, and hates His truth. The war, at times, may seem to be waged with courtesy and respect, but the hatred is real.

Fallen mankind doesn’t want to hear the truth if it condemns us, if it makes us feel bad, or if it makes us look bad. That is what it means to say that sinful man, by his nature, loves darkness and ***does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.*** It is so evident in our world today, in our American culture today, than it has ever been. We live in a nation that has invested massive amounts of energy and time to protect ourselves from such exposure. We have created a culture of condemning anything as sinful, of any beliefs as false, of lifestyles as evil as the greatest and unforgivable of sins. We have made excuses for

every kind of wickedness and have created a culture that promotes darkness, that defends the love of sin, and that demonizes the light and anyone who openly speaks the truth. We have media and entertainment and higher academia that bombards us with darkness dressed up as light. We have defined, enshrined, and codified politically correct speech regarding sin, which is to say that we have adopted Satan's vocabulary and dictionary and have enabled men and women to live in darkness all the while thinking they are basking in the light, open-minded, enlightened and tolerant. GK Chesterton said, **"Tolerance is the virtue of the man with no convictions."** And that is our society. What was once done in secret is now practiced in the open. People now brazenly parade their sin in the open and they can do so because the light of Christ has been so obscured that we are in deep darkness.

Why is it that sexual perversion, that the murder of the unborn, transgenderism, outright defiance of authority, that open flaunting of sin, defiance, rebellion, wickedness, corruption, and filth is heralded as so brave and so noble and so promoted? It is because we live in the darkness and we naturally love to affirm the sins of others so that we can be comforted in our own. When Christ, the light of the World, shines in His fullness, in His glory; when Jesus and His truth are put on open display it will have one of two effects on the soul. It will either break a person and lead them to repentance and faith, or it will drive him further into the darkness of self-delusion and self-deceit. Those who remain in the darkness would rather remain in the darkness than admit that they live in it. To come to Christ is to admit that you have been a failure as a human being -- ***"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"*** (Romans 3:23, ESV)

And that is why we need the new birth, why we need God to change our hearts to embrace the light that is in Christ. No one is going to be moved by the thought of God's amazing and incomparable love to send His only Son to save sinners unless he sees himself as part of a world that is corrupt, ruined, selfish, impure and proud. No one is going to feel an immense sense of need and hope in the thought that Christ has been provided as an undeserved and gracious Savior who does not admit that he or she needs to be saved and that he or she really does and has all along loved the darkness and hated the light. And that cannot happen apart from the new birth and the grace of God to open our eyes to our desperate need for Jesus. Except God move upon our hearts we would be completely unmoved by the love of God in the giving of His Son. We know it's true. Those who have come to Christ by faith know it is true. We who still battle indwelling, remaining sin and strive for holiness, know how in bondage to sin and utterly in darkness we would have remained apart from the grace of God.

John saw one group of people who loved the darkness, who loved their sin, who did not want to be exposed as sinners and so who hated Jesus Christ and His light but he also saw others. He saw people who were broken in their sin, who confessed their wickedness, who owned their rebellion, who confessed their unworthiness, who made no justification for their corruption, but who acted in truth. **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.** He saw a people who came to Jesus Christ, who came to Him believing, who came to Him trusting in the gospel of His death and resurrection, who came to Him confessing their desperate need for a Savior – who did what is true. They came to Christ so that it may be clearly seen that they have come, not in their own power, no in their own wisdom; they came out of darkness and into the light of faith in Christ by the power of God at work in them.

Do you believe? There is no greater question. It is impossible to overstate the massive importance of that question. Life or death, heaven or hell, blessing or cursing, all hinge on the truthful answer to that question. If you believe, you are pardoned, justified, accepted in God's sight, and have the promise of everlasting life. If you do not believe, you are perishing daily. Your sins are all upon your head, your guilt all upon you. Come out of the darkness and into the light. Believe in Christ!

JC Ryle said in response to God's immeasurable love to sinners, **“Nothing is so provoking to and offensive to God as to refuse the glorious salvation He has provided at so mighty a cost, by the death of His only begotten Son. Nothing is so suicidal on the part of man as to turn away from the only remedy that can heal his soul.”**

Beloved, you who are truly trusting in Christ this day, consider how great is God's love. What a glorious gift of love is Jesus Christ. John 3:16 is not something we learn and move on. Here is what I know about me. If I do not believe in the very real sinfulness and guilt of my heart and my soul apart from Christ, If I do not know and feel my need, then the love of God in Christ will scarcely move me at all. The sweetness and joy of redemption will not be part of my life. The infinite miracle of the new life will be commonplace. The wonder that to me, one who deserves hell, God has given eternal life will not create in me humility and genuine gratitude. It will not move me to obedience and fill me with the desire to know Christ more intimately. Salvation will seem boring. When the heart no longer believes, no longer feels,

the reality of hell, the gospel passes from good news to simply news. May that never be us. Charles Spurgeon said: **“For God to pity me I can understand, for God to condescend to have mercy upon me I can comprehend; but for him to LOVE me, for the pure one to love a sinner, for the infinitely great one to love a worm, is matchless, a miracle of miracles!”**

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