

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD
(John 3:16)

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

An old person came to Jesus one night. We don't know how old. But he may have come teetering and wobbling to the doorstep of Jesus. He was an old Jew. He was a proud Pharisee. He was most likely a member of the Sanhedrin which was the ruling body over Israel. Using our terminology, he was a Senator. Jesus called him "the teacher of Israel," so he was perhaps the preeminent teacher of the day. The people came to his classroom to learn about God.

I am sure that on this occasion Nicodemus, on behalf of the Sanhedrin, came to investigate Jesus. But in the sovereign plan of God Nicodemus was sent there that Jesus might investigate him. You see, Nicodemus came to this meeting with Jesus with an unbelieving heart. He came with a heart steeped in Judaism, but not a heart steeped in the grace of God. Nicodemus came to this meeting as a physical descendant of Abraham, but not a spiritual descendant. Nicodemus came as a man circumcised on the eighth day, but his heart was not circumcised at all. Nicodemus came to this meeting to see if Jesus was a man of God and he left pondering his own heart and wondering if he himself was a man of God. Nicodemus came wondering *when* he would see the

kingdom of God and he left wondering *if* he would see it.

And you see this is the first step of salvation. You must come to realize your own desperate need. You must be jarred to your senses. You must be laid bare in your own emptiness. You must first see the dark side before you can see the light. You must know that you are lost before you can be saved. You must know that you are unrighteous before you can find righteousness.

Poor Nicodemus was an old man who was blinded by his religion. He could not see over the temple walls to see the true Temple. He saw the bronze altar every day, but he could not see the true altar on Mt. Calvary. He saw the blood of the animals but he could not see the blood of the true sacrifice. He could see the Law, but he could not see grace. He saw the schoolmaster but he could not see the Master.

And I fear there are millions of people in this world even today, who cannot see past their religion to see the Redeemer. And though they offer the sacrifice of religious service day after day until they are old and gray like Nicodemus, they have never in a saving way seen the True Sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world.

Salvation is not doing at all. It is being. Salvation is "being changed." It is a new creation. It is being delivered from chains. It is being led out of darkness into marvelous light. Salvation is a new life. Salvation is inward and not outward. Salvation is tears where there used to be cold unrepentance. Salvation

is love where there used to be hate. Salvation is a spiritual pulse where there used to be no heartbeat whatsoever.

In short, Jesus told Nicodemus,

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

John 3:3

This concept of the new birth is one of the great doctrines in the Bible. I wish we had time to go over it and over it again. But let me just say that the new birth is the logical starting point of salvation realized.

Now I hope we all understand that the process of salvation is an eternal process that began before the foundation of the world. It began in the mind and will of God. He conceived it. He planned it in his wise counsels and he decreed it. But you must understand that what God decrees, he must also bring to pass.

Example: The homebuilder makes his plans and draws up the blueprint. But in due time he must also pick up the hammer and build.

And so God, takes out his eternal blueprint of salvation and in the course of time He builds His kingdom.

Now the tools that God uses in this great work of salvation are principally the Word of God and the Spirit of God. And he takes the raw materials of wretched sinners and builds his house. He takes liars and cheats and adulterers and murderers and the

angry and the selfish and the self-righteous and all those who love to do evil and he does a work on them with his Word and with his Spirit. And the beginning of this work is called the new birth.

God wondrously and mysteriously and miraculously raises the spiritually dead to spiritual life. It is by his great power that he does so. No one can explain it. It is beyond human comprehension. It is purely and simply a work of God whereby he regenerates whosoever he will. And he builds his kingdom one by one, one sinner at a time.

And so, he tells Nicodemus,

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

John 3:3

Nicodemus had done it all, but it was not enough. Jesus told Nicodemus that salvation is first and foremost a change of heart. The starting point of salvation realized is a new heart that results from a new birth.

What a wonderful gift this is – the gift of a new heart. That old heart was sick. No, that old one was dead in trespasses and sins. The light had gone out in that old heart. And that's why the Scriptures say,

The heart is desperately wicked, who can know it?

Jeremiah 17:9

And so Jesus told Nicodemus about the new birth in John 3:3-13. And then, Jesus told him about

the work of redemption that makes the new birth possible. (vs. 14, 15)

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.
John 3:14

And we saw the necessity of the atonement. For it says, the Son of man *must* be lifted up. And he must be lifted up because there is no such thing as unpunished sin.

Sin does not go unpunished in God's universe. It is a universal principle. God is righteous and he condemns sin and he deals righteously with sin and sinners are punished accordingly with an everlasting punishment. And in order to forgive sinners, God must lay their sins on another.

The whole concept of forgiveness and salvation is predicated on the willingness of Jesus to be punished on our behalf. And so it says,

Even so, must the Son of man be lifted up.
John 3:14

And that brings us to our text for this morning.

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

The Love of God

Here we have that which motivated God to save sinners. It is love. Whatever we can say about salvation, it is based on the sheer love of God. You would have thought that God would have abandoned mankind when Adam sinned. But no, it appears that something deep in the heart of God caused him to redeem them. And that something was love.

You would have thought that when murder entered the world, that God would have then abandoned mankind; But no, not even then. You would have thought that as the history of the world progressed and man proved himself to be an uncompromising enemy of God, that God would have abandoned him; But no, not even then.

You would have thought that when he sent his own Son into the world and mankind rejected him and crucified him that God would have abandoned the world; But no, not even then.

And why didn't God abandon us to hell? All we can say is that God loved the world. We can't fathom this depth of God's love. We can't get our minds around this. But we simply accept that somehow God loved us. In spite of it all, he loved us.

I suppose that the nearest human example of this kind of love is the love of a parent for a child. The child may be incorrigible. The child may rebel against the parent. The child may ultimately hate the parent. But the parent loves the child.

And it says God loved the world. The world was incorrigible. The world rebelled against God. The world ultimately hated God. And yet, God loved the world.

I. It is a love for the unlovable.

This is not a love that we know anything about. We love because of something lovable in someone else. We love because they are nice to us. Or, we love because they have something to offer us. But God loves when we have nothing to offer Him. God loves when the object of His love is thoroughly unlovely. We like to love attractive objects. But God loves the unattractive. God loves when there is nothing to love.

There was a woman caught in the act of adultery. She was caught doing the very thing that God hates. And yet, Jesus loved her.

There was a thief hanging on a cross. He had violated God's law and man's law. And yet, Jesus loved him.

And our passage says that God so loved the world. There was nothing in the world that was lovable, and yet God loved it.

Not only is God's love a love for the unlovable, but

II. It is a love of the will.

God doesn't look down on the world and get the warm and fuzzies. God doesn't love the world

because the world is so lovely and he is moved with emotion. Rather, God loves the world because he chose to love it.

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 2:4, 5

III. It is a love of redemption.

God loved the world. This is the same world that Christians are forbidden to love.

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

I John 2:15, 16

So, we are forbidden to love this world because of its wickedness. And yet, God loved it. Now when God tells us not to love this world, he tells us not to love it with a selfish participation. The world is wicked and we are not to attach ourselves to it by loving it.

But God is not in danger of loving it in that way. God doesn't love the world in that way. God is in no danger of falling in love with a big house or a big bank account. God does not fall in love with the sin of this world. But, God loves the world in a way that we could

never love the world. He loves the world in a love of redemption. And therefore he loves an otherwise unlovable world.

The Method of God's Love

It says, God so loved the world. This word doesn't talk so much about the extent of God's love as if to say, "God loved the world soooooo much." Rather, it means that God loved the world *in this way*. And in what way did God love the world? He gave his Son.

This is the greatest love that we know anything about. If a father is willing to give his son, this is love indeed. And if he is willing to give his son to die, this is love at a very high level. If he is willing to give his son to die a crucifixion kind of death, this is love to the highest degree. And if he is willing to give his son to die a crucifixion kind of death for someone who hates him, this is love unimaginable.

And God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son . . .

The Aim of God's Love

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth should not perish, but have everlasting life.

There was a very specific goal in mind in giving his Son. And that goal was eternal life. It was that believers should not perish, but have eternal life. Jesus did not die to set a good example. Jesus did not die so that God could shed common grace on all

men. But Jesus died so that men would not perish and would have eternal life.

The Extent of the Gift of God

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:16

Now when some people read this verse, they may read it as though God gave the Son for everyone. After all, it says he loved the world. And John uses the word whosoever. And therefore, they say that Jesus died for every single human being in the world and that the benefits of his death flow to every human being.

And let me just say that the primary benefit flowing to the world as a result of the gift of the Son, is eternal life. It says,

For God so loved the world . . . that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

John 3:16

And it is clearly obvious that eternal life does not flow to every man. Some men have no part in the death of Christ. They don't want a part in it and they have no part in it.

Now before we discuss the extent of the atoning work of Christ, I want everyone to be aware that we believe that the death of Christ is fully sufficient for the sins of the entire world. His death

was of infinite value in the eyes of the Father. His death was sufficient to save one person or one million people or tens of billions of people. The value of the atoning work of Christ is like a jar of oil that never runs out. It is sufficient to save all.

And then let us say that the offer of Christ is made to every man. There is an absolute universal offer of the gospel. We don't withhold the offer of the gospel of Christ from any man. Christ sent his apostles out into the whole world and some received the offer and some rejected it.

And we certainly don't say that the gospel is limited to one nation. To us this is obvious, but in the day of Christ, this message knocked them off their feet. The Jews thought the blessings of God were for them only. And when the message rang out that Jesus died for the whole world, this was a hard pill to swallow. And when Jesus told Nicodemus that God so loved the world, Nicodemus must have been somewhat offended.

I am sure Nicodemus thought, "What do you mean God loves the world? God doesn't love the world, God loves Israel." But Jesus said, "God so loved the world . . ."

Now when we read John 3:16, if we read carefully, we will notice that the gift of the Son is not given universally. Rather, it is given to a very exclusive group.

You see, the verse does not read, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that everyone would not perish, but have everlasting

life.” Rather, the verse limits the benefits of Christ’s death to those who believe.

Christ’s death and the eternal benefits of it are given to a limited class of human beings. They are given to all believers. And so, even the Arminian must admit that since all are not believers, not all partake of Christ’s death. But I suggest to you that this verse says even more than that.

You see, many suppose that Christ died in order that the whole world might have a chance to be saved. And they say that the goal which God had in mind in the death of Christ was to create the legal possibility for all to be saved.

But I say that this verse says that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that believers (whoever those might be) should not perish.

It seems to me that the thrust of this discourse with Nicodemus is that God must do something to save you. He must give you a birth and he must cause you to see the kingdom.

God doesn’t just lay the benefits of the death of Christ out there on a hypothetical platter and then ask the world to go get it by faith. Rather, God applies the work of Christ to the hearts of men by a creative act called the new birth.

This is the whole point. Without a new birth, we would never appropriate the work of Christ. Without a new birth, the whole world would fail to lay hold of the general offer of Christ.

Let's be more specific than that. Without a new birth, not one of us would have claimed the benefits of the gospel. Our hearts were too dark. Our hearts were unresponsive. But when by the power of God we have been made alive, then and only then, do we believe in the mighty, saving power of the blood of Christ.

You see, believers are a very selective and limited group. They are those who God has planned to save from the beginning. They are those who God has made alive by the new birth. And they are those for whom Christ died.

Do you suppose that anyone can believe in Christ without a work of God in his heart?

Look in Acts 13. Paul and Barnabas were preaching the gospel of Christ on one of their missionary journeys. And look who believed.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

Acts 13:48

You see, God didn't send Jesus generically but he sent him particularly. Jesus had a very particular people in mind when he went to the cross. It was those who had been ordained to eternal life. And he went to the cross so that they would not perish.

There is only one group of people who will believe and they are those who have been ordained to eternal life.

Jesus was talking to some unbelieving Jews one day and listen to what he told them.

But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish . . .

John 10:28

Sounds a lot like John 3:16, doesn't it?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16

In John 3:16 it is believers who will not perish. In John 10:28 it is the sheep who will never perish.

The Benefits of the Gift

Let me just say that God has given a gift to his people and that gift is Jesus Christ himself. Whatever benefits come along with the gift can only be secondary and lesser gifts.

Christ is the gift. And I think Christ is given to us not only in the sense that he died for us, but also in the sense that he is our friend and brother and Redeemer for evermore. He will be our constant companion throughout eternity and when we have personal, face to face fellowship with him in glory all other benefits will fade into insignificance.

There is a song in our hymnals called *Face to Face*. Listen to the words of this song.

*Face to face with Christ, my Savior.
Face to face what will it be;
When with rapture I behold Him;
Jesus Christ who died for me.*

*Only faintly now I see Him;
With the darkling veil between;
But a blessed day is coming;
When His glory shall be seen.*

*What rejoicing in His presence;
When are banished grief or pain;
When the crooked ways are straightened;
And the dark things shall be plain.*

*Face to face, O blissful moment!
Face to face, to see and know;
Face to face with my Redeemer;
Jesus Christ who loves me so.*

But even more than seeing Jesus face to face, and living in the light of his glory, there is more that he has given to us.

Our text says that we shall never perish. This word perish is a word that applies to the wicked. It applies to unbelievers. They shall perish. But it does not apply to us because we have believed in Christ.

That tells me that to perish does not mean to be obliterated into non-existence. Obliteration would be too good for the wicked. When they are condemned and consigned to the pits of hell for all eternity, they will plead for obliteration. When their tongues cleave to the roofs of their mouths for lack of moisture, they will wish to be obliterated. When the

lights are turned out and total blackness is absorbed into the souls of the wicked, they will wish that they were never born. When eternal loneliness causes the soul to suffer the pain of the outcast, they will wish that perish meant obliteration.

But perish does not mean to be snuffed out as though you never existed. Perish means to suffer eternity under the penalty of God's wrath. Perish means to live without the slightest hint of the light and goodness of God. To perish means that God himself has turned his back on you forever and his mercy is shut off to you.

No man knows the pain of perishing in this life because wherever you are in this world, there is still the goodness of God enveloping you and preserving you. No matter what dire circumstances you face in this life, you have not suffered the loss of His providential care. Though you may hate and despise God from day to day, still you live in his world where there is abundant grace and mercy flowing to every human being.

But one day the wicked shall perish. All light will be removed. All mercy will be withdrawn. Every good gift of God will be taken away. Every good pleasure will be voided. I suspect even the memory of pleasure will be taken away because hell is a place of perishing. There will be a sense of overwhelming loss in hell. All things will be irretrievably lost. All your accomplishments will perish. All your talents and gifts will perish. Your money will be gone. Your self-worth will be gone. Your friends and loved ones will be gone and you will know the meaning of the word perish.

The worst thing about hell is that God will be gone. The Creator will abandon you. There will be no hint of Him. All of the wonderful attributes of Him will be excluded from you. And especially, his love will not shine in hell. You will know for a certainty in hell that He hates sin and he despises sinners. And you will know the meaning of the word perish for evermore.

But Jesus told Nicodemus that God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish.

What a wonderful promise to latch onto by faith. Shall never perish! Shall never perish!

There is a flip side to perishing and it is eternal life.

Whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

If we could visit heaven for five minutes I suspect that we would abandon all efforts to gain this world. We would see the utter foolishness of laying down roots here. As magnificent as God's creation is, it is only a temporary residence. And it is a fallen world. This world is a place of great trouble because of sin. It is a place where evil has taken root.

This world is a place where a deranged, psychopath shoots his mother in the face and then goes to an elementary school and massacres little children who came to school to learn their ABC's.

This world is a place where a police officer walks up to a door to serve a subpoena and is shot to death.

This world is a place where children kill their mothers; mothers kill their babies; husbands cheat on wives and wives on husbands; people sleep with everybody; homosexuality is considered normal and acceptable behavior when God calls it a vile affection. (Romans 1:26) Deviancy is normal and normalcy is considered deviant.

This world is a place where the very name of God is a curse word. Even in our country, the name of God is being erased out of constitutional documents and out of public consciousness.

This world is a place of great suffering because of sin. All manner of sickness and diseases have befallen mankind because of sin.

But If we could just visit heaven for a moment we would shout for joy, for there is none of that there. There is a clean place that God has prepared for us. There is a pure and holy place reserved for us. There is a place where joy rings out every day. Peace flows like a river there. And there are no more tears.

And this is what John means when he says we shall not perish, but have eternal life.

May God bless our feeble efforts to comprehend the depth and majesty of this fantastic and famous Bible verse. Most of all, I pray that He would impress on our hearts the simplicity of the gospel message.

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