

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

John 3:14-18

The last couple of weeks we've been talking about the concept of being born again. It reminds me of a story about an irate subscriber who stormed into a newspaper office waving the current edition of the paper. He demanded to see "whoever wrote the obituary column." When referred to a young reporter, he stormed, "You can see I'm very much alive, and you've put me in the obituary column! I demand a retraction!" Replied the reporter, "I never retract a story. But I tell you what I'll do. I'll put you in the birth column and give you a fresh start."

Being born again does not quite work that way, as we will learn today when we look at what is probably the most often quoted verse in the Bible, John 3:16. It is most likely the most quoted verse because it sums up the message of the Bible as well as it could be summarized in one verse: "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" Because of God's love for all of mankind, He was willing to send Jesus, the second member of the Trinity, to earth in the flesh of a man to suffer and die so that all people who believe in what He did for them may have eternal life in Heaven. But in order to get the full flavor of the message, we need to look at some verses before and after John 3:16 and read them together to complete the thought. So let us do that.

John 3:14-18 ESV:

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

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.

That is quite a mouthful and if we stopped right here and did nothing more this morning than read this passage over and over again, and memorize it, there would not be a theologian in the

world who had anything on our understanding of God's message.

Remember that Jesus is still talking to Nicodemus in these verses. The story in Numbers 21:4-9 was certainly familiar to Nicodemus. It is a story of sin, for the nation rebelled against God and had to be punished. God sent fiery serpents that bit the people so that many died. It is also a story of grace, for Moses went to God asking help for the people and God provided a remedy. He told Moses to make a brass serpent and lift it up on a pole for all to see. Any stricken person who looked at the serpent would immediately be healed. So, it is also a story of faith. When the people looked by faith, they were saved.¹

The verb *lifted up* has two meanings. It means to be crucified (John 8:28; 12:32-34) and to be glorified and exalted. In his Gospel, John points out that Jesus' crucifixion was actually the means of His glorification (John 12:23ff). The cross was not the end of His glory; it was the means of His glory (Acts 2:33).²

Much as the serpent was lifted up on that pole, so the Son of God would be lifted up on a cross. Why? To save us from sin and death. In the camp of Israel, the solution to the "serpent problem" was not in polling the serpents, making medicine, pretending they were not there, passing anti-serpent laws, or climbing the pole. The answer was in looking by faith at the uplifted serpent.³

The whole world has been bitten by sin, and "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). God sent His Son to die, not only for Israel, but for a whole world. How is a person born from above? How is he or she saved from eternal perishing? By believing on Jesus Christ, by looking to Him in faith.⁴

"On January 6, 1850, a snowstorm almost crippled the city of Colchester, England; and a teenage boy was unable to get to the church he usually attended. So he made his way to a nearby Primitive Methodist chapel, where an ill-prepared layman was substituting for the absent preacher. His text was Isaiah 45:22: "*Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.*" For many months this young teenager had been miserable and under deep conviction; but though he had been reared in church (both his father and grandfather were preachers), he did not have the assurance of salvation.

"The unprepared substitute minister did not have much to say, so he kept repeating the text. "*A man need not go to college to learn to look,*" he shouted. "*Anyone can look? A child can look!*" About that time, he saw the visitor sitting to one side, and he pointed at him and said, "*Young man, you look very miserable. Young man, look to Jesus Christ!*" The young man did look by faith, and that was how the great preacher **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** was converted."⁵

¹ Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament .

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid

The difference between perishing and living, and between condemnation and salvation, is faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus could well have come to this world as a Judge and destroyed every rebellious sinner; but in love, He came to this world as our Savior, and He died for us on the cross. He became the "uplifted serpent." The serpent in Moses' day brought physical life to dying Jews; but Jesus Christ gives eternal life to anyone who trusts Him. He has salvation for the whole world.⁶

In this passage beginning in John 3:14 and ending in John 3:18, Jesus provides each person all they need to know for salvation and eternal life.

Far too many people and far too many churches complicate the process, and far too many people do not want to accept the fact that they cannot earn salvation on their own. They want to believe that they are better than others and therefore deserve better treatment. I have seen far too many people reject Christianity because it teaches that God will forgive the worst of sinners if they believe in the blood of Jesus as payment for their sins and that such forgiveness is available even if a person makes that faith commitment with their dying breath. These people do not think it is fair for someone who has done good things for 40 years to be treated the same way as someone who has only had 40 seconds to do good things. But that is the way it is for believers. They must accept Jesus as their Savior. It is not the good works that save you and get you into Heaven; it is the belief, the faith, the trust. It is a gift, and the only thing you need to do to earn it is to accept it. You can do that when you are 5 years old or 10, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 years old, or beyond. The advantage of receiving Christ early in life, however, is that you can avoid a lot of pain and grief that is caused by pride and self-will. Being saved does not promise an easy life, but it does promise a peaceful life.

A closer look at this passage will show clearly why anyone can get to Heaven by accepting the teaching here as absolute truth. Some explanation will certainly be helpful for those who are not familiar with the Bible.

Verse 15: "*whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*"

Whoever means everybody, which means everybody in the entire world, no matter what they have done during their lives. Mass murderers, prostitutes, child molesters, embezzlers, wife-beaters, idol worshippers, alcoholics, drug addicts, along with gossips, individuals who bend the truth, and people who cheat "just a little" on their income tax are all still able to be forgiven and have eternal life in Heaven if they believe in Jesus Christ as the One who died to pay for those sins. This means that Hitler, Stalin, Al Capone, Saddam Hussein, and even far-left democrats could have forgiveness in the last few moments of their lives if they had accepted Christ as the substitute who paid for their sinful, evil lives. Had they done that they would have been escorted into Heaven the moment they died. What a gift! What love! Did any of these guys do that? I doubt it very much but no one can know for certain. There has been no one, by the way, since God put human beings on earth who has not sinned. No one that is but Jesus Christ. He, therefore, could be the only perfect, sinless sacrifice that God demanded for forgiveness of sin.

⁶ Ibid.

Verse 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."

There is so much more in the Christmas story than the birth of a Babe in Bethlehem. It is the story of a loving God who set aside His glory to come take on the form of sinful human beings, so that those human beings could have a personal relationship with Him and eventually live with Him forever. What kind of ability does God possess to love people who are sinning all the time? How do you feel about people who do not do what you want them to do, who do not think the way you want them to think, and who continually fall short of what you expect of them? Kind of sounds like your teenager, does it not? But that is how mankind responds to God. But yet God loves us and wants us to come to Him so that He might bless us, and I bet that is the same way you feel about your teenager. Maybe there is a lesson in that thought that can help us understand how God can love us as His children, even if we are bad.

God loves us in a way and so deeply that it is beyond our understanding, but what higher standard is there to prove love than to sacrifice your beloved child in death so that some miserable sinner can be saved and have eternal life in Heaven? In the best translations the phrase, "*His only begotten Son*" is used. "*Only begotten*" or "*one and only*" tells us this Son is "special" or "beloved." Do you have children? Would you be willing to sacrifice your child so that a serial killer could be saved and have eternal life in Heaven? In fact would you want to allow your child to be killed so that your nephew or brother-in-law, or sister could be saved and have eternal life? There is no stronger bond between anyone than there is between a parent and a child. Would you be willing to sacrifice your life so that God's will could be accomplished through your martyrdom and death as a believer? You should, because that is how much He loved us and anything less on our part would be a rejection of God. His love is unconditional and ours must be as well.

Imagine the suffering Jesus endured. Here is the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, who is without sin, and who must then bear the sin of all the world upon His tortured and beaten body as He hangs on the cross slowly dying an excruciatingly painful death. He is also for the first time in history separated from His Father because God could not look upon the sin of the entire world that was heaped upon His beloved Son. That, my friends, is love. It is the kind of love that all of us may not be able to give while we are still in these human bodies, but there is no reason that we cannot feel that kind of love, because we see the evidence of it on the cross.

Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the gospel in miniature." "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" D. L. Moody said this verse brought him to an understanding of the love of God. As Moody tells it, early in his ministry he had gone to England. While there, he met a young minister by the name of Henry Morehouse, and in their conversation Morehouse said to Moody, "*I am thinking of going to America.*" Moody responded, "*Well, if you should ever get to Chicago, come down to my church and I will give you a chance to preach.*" Now Moody really did not mean that. He realized after he said it that he hoped this man did not come to America because he had never heard him preach.

Some time later Moody received a telegram that read, "*Just arrived in New York. Will be in Chicago on Sunday. Morehouse.*" Moody did not know what to do. He had promised the man his pulpit, but he had never heard him preach! So after discussing the matter with his best counselor, his wife, and with the church leaders, he decided to allow him to preach one time. Then if he did okay, he could preach again. Moody had to go out of town, and Morehouse came.

After the week was over, Moody returned and asked his wife, "*How did the young preacher do?*" His wife responded, "*He is a better preacher than you are. He is telling sinners that God loves them. You must go hear him!*" Moody said, "*What! He is telling sinners that God loves them? That's not true!*" She said, "*Well, he has been preaching on John 3:16 all week long.*" Moody made haste to get down to the church that night. Morehouse stood in the pulpit and began by saying, "*I have been hunting for a text all week, and I have not been able to find a better one than John 3:16, so I will just talk about it once more.*" Later Moody testified that on that night he saw the greatness of the love of God as he had never seen it before.⁷

John 3:16 speaks of God's love, a love that is impossible to imagine in its scope, a love that is never ending, a love that extends as far as the eye can see and beyond. That is the heart of the gospel. It is not simply "*God is love,*" but "*God so loved the world that he gave.*" That is what forms the foundation for the new birth. "*Nicodemus, do you want to understand how such things that Christ is telling you can be? It is because of the boundless love of God.*" F. M. Lehman wrote a great hymn about the love of God. Betty and I love this hymn so much that we had it sung at our wedding. Interestingly, Lehman did not pen the last verse. He found it inscribed on the wall of an insane asylum next to the bed of a man who had evidently found the love of God before he passed away.

“The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell,
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave his Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.

“Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.”⁸

⁷ Preaching the Word.

⁸ Ibid..

"Nicodemus, the new birth is possible because of the great, boundless love of God." That is the meaning of the words "God so loved the world." The day we die will be the greatest experience of our lives if we have invited Christ to be our Savior. John 3:16 says that when we believe, we have eternal life as our present possession. Eternal life begins from the moment we believe.

God's love is not limited to a select group of people but His gift of love is for the whole world. God's love was expressed in the giving of His most valuable gift, **His unique Son.**

Romans 8:3, 32 NLT:

*3 The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. **He sent his own Son** in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us **by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.***

*32 Since he did not spare even **his own Son** but gave him up for us all, **won't he also give us everything else?***

In John 3:16 the Greek word translated in some translations as "**one and only**" or "**only begotten,**" referring to the Son, is *monogenes*, which means "only begotten," or "only born-one." The word is also used in 1 John 4:9 NLT:

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him.

What part do we have to play in this transaction? We need only to reach out and receive the gift and say, "Thank You." Salvation comes only as a gift because of God's grace and love for us, there is no way we can earn it no matter how hard we might try.

John 1:12-13NLT.

12 But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.

*13 **They are reborn**—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*

A person is saved by believing, by trusting in Christ. **Perish** (*apoletai* in the Greek) does not mean to cease to exist but rather a final destiny of misery in Hell apart from God. **Eternal life** is a new quality of life, which a believer has now as a present possession and will possess forever.⁹

John 10:27-28 NLT

27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me,

⁹ Bible Knowledge Commentary.

John 17:1-3 NLT:

1 After saying all these things, Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you.

2 For you have given him authority over everyone. He gives eternal life to each one you have given him.

3 And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth

There are two things we need to be perfectly clear on here. One is that we must be born again. The other is that the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, must be lifted up. Our salvation requires both the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ. By believing in these things the Spirit of Christ is alive within the believer to provide us regeneration, a new life through a new birth as well as giving us eternal life upon the death of our physical bodies. Receiving this gift of being born again is the only way God will allow us into Heaven.

Romans 10:9, NAS

. . . if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved.

God saves by grace! "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Now, how does God save? God saves by grace. God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever (you can write your name in here and I can write mine) believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Notice that with the word believe is the little preposition in, which means to believe in Christ. That is, we trust Him as the One who bore the penalty for our sins. This is a personal thing. We must each believe that He died in our place. You must believe that He died for you.¹⁰

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."

It is true that those who do not believe will be condemned, but God's purpose in sending Jesus into the world was **to save** them, **not to condemn** them. God does not delight in the death of the wicked according to Ezekiel 18:23, 31-32 NLT:

23 "Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign Lord. Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live.

31 Put all your rebellion behind you, and find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O people of Israel?

32 I don't want you to die, says the Sovereign Lord. Turn back and live!

God desires that everyone be saved, 1 Timothy 2:1-4 NLT:

I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede

¹⁰ J. Vernon McGee's Thru The Bible.

on their behalf, and give thanks for them.

2 Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.

3 This is good and pleases God our Savior,

4 who wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 NLT:

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.

God was in Christ giving the people of the world an opportunity to restore their relationship with Him, and in the process giving the world an opportunity for salvation and eternal life. The world could not be saved except through the perfect sacrifice of Christ. No one, and I repeat, no one from any time in history, or from any country, or from any religion can have their relationship with God restored without believing that Christ died for their sins and is therefore their Savior.

That means that all the people who have and do believe the doctrine of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Shamanism, Wicca's, or anything else, are not going to Heaven. They are going to go to Hell forever and they will not be happy there. If you are saying to yourself "*That is not fair. There are a lot of good people who do not accept Jesus as Savior. Why should they go to Hell?*" The answer is because they are not good enough. The only way to be good enough cannot be achieved by our own efforts, but by accepting what Christ has done for us. If you choose to reject this truth, you have had your chance. You have heard the truth and your eternity is now in your own hands. And about those other religions, they do not hold a candle to Christianity, to the perfection of the Word of God given us in the Bible, and I will readily discuss the differences between Christianity and other religions, as well its exclusiveness to truth, whenever and wherever anyone would like to do so.

God knew we were all hopeless and could not meet the requirements for Heaven on our own. So instead of simply destroying all of us He implemented this incredible plan so that everyone could be saved and go to Heaven instead of Hell. But He wanted to have each individual person decide that they wanted to turn away from sin and turn to God for a new life. Knowing that a perfect sinless sacrifice would be required to accomplish this cleansing of human sin, God decided that only He could be that sacrifice. So out of love He was willing to take on human flesh in the form of Jesus and come to earth to allow Himself to be sacrificed to pay for the sin of all mankind. He could have come to earth to judge and punish sinners, but instead He was willing to come first in an attempt to save people rather than condemn them. One day in the future Jesus will come as Judge of the world, but before He does that He wanted to give everyone a chance to repent of his or her sins and accept the one and only way into paradise.

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.

Any person who has ever lived or will ever live has an entire lifetime to believe in Jesus as Savior, and if they do that they will not be judged, condemned, and sentenced to Hell for eternity. But instead they will enter into the Kingdom of God and be assured of eternity in Heaven. And once that salvation has been given it will never be taken away no matter what you do. However, if any person refuses to believe in Jesus as Savior, they have condemned themselves to Hell for eternity and will have only themselves to blame for their decision. If they choose that they believe God and want to be with Him, they will be. If they choose not to believe God and not be with Him, they will not be with Him. The choice is ours. You may have and get whatever you want. You have an entire lifetime to make your decision, but the catch is that you don't know how long that lifetime will be.

Anyone who believes in Christ is not condemned. That means they will not go to Hell. Even though a person may have been the world's worst sinner, they are not dealt with according to what their sins deserve. Why? Because God sent Jesus to save us. How awful it will be for unbelievers who have no Savior. There is no way they can make it on their own goodness.

Unbelief is a sin against God's mercy and grace. It is shaped by the hostility of one's heart to the things of God, from the love of sin in various forms. Sinful works are works of darkness and those who love sin go as far away from the light as they can get in order that their sin cannot be seen in the light of God's presence. John 1:5 says, "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.*" Then in John 8:12 we read: "*Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."* People hate Christ because they love sin. They reject the knowledge of truth so that they might remain comfortable in their ignorance. On the other hand, a person who has been born again embraces this truth. He wants more than anything to know what the will of God is and to then do it. A complete change has taken place in the mind and heart of a person who has been reborn. The love of God now fills this person's heart because of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the willingness of the person to surrender their will to the will of the Holy Spirit.¹¹

When we do what we know to be God's will in our lives by asking the Holy Spirit to guide us and lead us to do things that glorify God, then we are truly doing good works, works which are done by the power of God within us for His sake not for ours, and because our motive is to glorify God, we may benefit from those things as well. We are not doing those things in order to be saved; we are doing them because we are saved.

Imagine that after a lifetime of satisfying our various bodily desires and pleasures (sex, alcohol, drugs, etc) we die in sin. In other words we have rejected Christ and have continued to satisfy only those things that we want: Lust of the flesh, lust of the eye, and the pride of life. Imagine that kind of a death and within the blink of an eye awakening to the reality of Hell's prison all around you. You then finally cry out for mercy, you plead for another chance, but it is too late. You hear the voice of God saying: "*Depart from me, I never knew you.*"

¹¹ Matthew Henry Concise.

A believer in Jesus Christ will never be condemned. Romans 8:1 NLT: *“So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.”* John 5:24 NLT: *“I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.”*

Moses' illustration in verse 14 is not only a good one because it tells us what will solve the problem, but because it also tells us what will not solve the problem. Would it not be just like mankind to have tried every possible remedy to solving the problem of the poisonous venom that was killing them all off? They could have called a meeting; they could have had the venom analyzed by various scientific laboratories; they could have questioned the snakes to determine what their motive was for biting them. They could have contacted NASOCC, The National Association for Snakes and Other Crawling Creatures. They could have tried anything and everything and they would have died trying because they did not do one simple thing. They did not look to God for the answer and for His help.

Similarly, in our lives today, we try to solve problems by doing all kinds of things that we think might solve the problem. Everything that is but getting down on our knees. Or as Nicodemus says, *“How can this be? How can I be born again?”* Well, Nicodemus, you can be born again, that is, you can become a Christian, by believing in Christ alone and by looking to the cross. We must give up our dependence on ourselves, our cleverness, our own self-improvement, our plans of becoming religious. We must simply look to Jesus.

The new nature in the Christian comes on the basis of the atonement of Christ; that is, Christ dying on the cross and rising again so that we may have the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Have you looked to Him? The Scriptures say, *“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other”* (Isaiah 45:22). Look to Jesus Christ, believe, and in doing so, have eternal life.¹²

¹² Preaching the Word.