

EXPOSITION OF JOHN

Message #16

John 3:13-21

An artist wanted to paint a picture of the Prodigal Son so he went and visited insane asylums, jails, poor houses to try and find just the right individual who looked wretched enough to paint. One day, in downtown Chicago, he spotted a beggar who had the perfect look. He went to the man and told him he wanted to paint him and that he would pay him well if he would come to his studio and sit for him. The beggar agreed. On the day the artist was to begin, the beggar showed up and said, "I'm here for the appointment you have made with me." The artist looked at him and said, "I do not know you. I was to meet a poor beggar." The man replied "I am the beggar, but I thought I would dress up and look nice for you to paint." The artist said, "I did not choose you in your fine clothing, I choose you the way you were, in all of your filth. You are of no use to me now, depart from me." There will be many who will hear those words on the day of judgment. They made themselves look as nice as they could, but they did not see themselves as a dirty, filthy sinner in need of a Savior.

We are in the chapter in John that contains the most famous verse in all of the Bible – John 3:16. Signs are often held up at sporting events, political rallies and I even saw one during the O.J. Simpson trial. It is a great verse, it is a profound verse which sits in an amazing context and we are going to see that verse in its context.

Now let us set the stage for this tremendous passage of Scripture. This portion of John 3 is in the context of the discussion that Jesus is having with Nicodemus. You cannot dismiss this verse from its context.

Nicodemus, a nice looking high-ranking religious man, has come to talk with Jesus Christ. He is a ruler of the Jews. He is a key teacher of Israel. He is a man who is thinking political kingdom. When he gets to Christ, Jesus wastes no time in confronting him with the truth that in order for him to even see the kingdom of God, he must have a new birth. Then Christ takes it further by saying that this new birth must come out of heaven, it must come from God through His Spirit. In other words, a new birth is not attainable by any man through his physical works or religion. If one is to be born again, God must not only reveal salvation to a person He must also bring it about. As you see this section in its context, Christ's point is this:

IN ORDER FOR ANY PERSON TO SEE AND ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD ONE MUST BE BORN AGAIN AND THE ONLY WAY FOR ONE TO BE BORN AGAIN IS TO PERSONALLY BELIEVE THAT JESUS CHRIST, THE GOD/MAN, IS THE ONLY WAY OF GETTING ONE'S SINS FORGIVEN.

John 3:1-21 contains two lines of thought: **1) One must have a new spiritual birth in order to enter the kingdom of God (3:1-12); 2) One must believe in Jesus Christ in order to experience the new spiritual birth (3:13-21).** One may skirt around this subject for the rest of his life - but here is the crux of it - **Jesus Christ, the God/Savior, is the only way for a person to be saved and the only way to be born again is to personally believe in Him as the only way for you to be saved.**

The first chapters of John establish that Jesus is God and as we come to John 3 this chapter establishes that Jesus is the God/ Savior. One must believe in Him to be born again.

If you are a person who is really after truth concerning yourself, God and heaven - you will see yourself as a hopeless sinner who is in need of a personal Savior. Your Savior must be God because any person less than God is just another sinner like you. If you are not really after truth, you will run from this reality and will continue to think you are okay and you don't need any Savior except yourself and your own works and your own religion. In these verses there are five eternal realities that Christ reveals here:

ETERNAL REALITY #1 – Man cannot ascend up to God to gain salvation, God must descend to man to give salvation. 3:13

There is a major chasm between the flesh and the Spirit, between Holy God and sinful man. There is deep doctrine in this verse. No man can ascend into heaven. In Greek, there is an article “the” before the noun “heaven” meaning the specific heaven being discussed here is the Throne of God heaven. This is the heaven most people long to ascend to. Most people want to go to heaven. **The point here is that no man can get to this location of God’s heaven on his own**. His works will not take him to heaven, his religion will not take him to heaven, his goodness will not take him to heaven. **In order for a person to get to heaven, heaven must come down to man and make some provision for him to get there.**

Jesus Christ was uniquely qualified to speak about heavenly matters such as “the heaven” because He came out of this location to come to earth (3:13b). This is critical in moving toward John 3:16 because ever since chapter 1, John has been establishing the Deity of Jesus Christ.

There is an assumption that transcends the Bible - apart from God’s intervention for man, people perish. If God does not provide some means of salvation, every sinner will perish because all have sinned and this eliminates the possibility of them going to heaven.

Now verse 13 says that no one has ascended into the heaven, but there is One who descended from the heaven to make it possible for one to go to heaven. The One who descended was none other than the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. Not one person of his own volition can ascend to heaven. **Jesus Christ is heaven’s provision for any sinful person to be saved.**

One might ask where did people go prior to this when they died? Where did Enoch go when he was taken? Where did Elijah go when he was taken in a whirlwind? They went to a place called Abraham's bosom or Paradise. Jesus Christ is the One who opened the door making it possible for a person to go to heaven.

ETERNAL REALITY #2 – God's salvation demands that the Son of Man be lifted up so people can **look to Him**, a salvation Savior, as Moses lifted up a salvation serpent. 3:14-15

Nicodemus was a man who knew the O.T. and he certainly can relate to Moses. The episode referred to here comes from a strange story found in Numbers 21:4-9. God sent a plague of poison snakes to the Israelites when they were in the wilderness because they spoke against God and Moses. The Israelites acknowledged their sin and cried for mercy. God told Moses to heat some bronze in a fire and form it to look like a serpent and set it on a stand.

There are many differences between Biblical salvation and all religions of the world, but the most significant difference is that Biblical salvation is a “non-works” salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). All false systems of religion make their system a works system. The illustration Christ uses here absolutely proves this point.

Any person who was bitten by a serpent, who would simply look to the stand would live. Not any human effort or works were involved; all he had to do was look. If he didn't look to God's provision, he would die.

It would not matter if you were one foot away from the stand with your back turned to it, if you didn't look at it you would die, you would perish. Now the children of Israel could have said we are going to try and come up with our own way to save ourselves:

- 1) We will form a society of all who have been bitten and we'll all discuss the way we feel.
- 2) We will read the O.T. Law and sing hymns. Recite Bible verses and sing songs.
- 3) We will have a baptism service - we will immerse people and sprinkle people with water.
- 4) We will take an offering and have all snake bitten people make sacrifices.
- 5) We will hold a big religious rally and cheer up the emotions of those bitten.
- 6) We will develop support groups for family and friends who are hurting over this matter.
- 7) We will get the best doctors we have to give us some medicine.
- 8) We will form a moral group whose job it will be to target and kill the serpents.
- 9) We will bring in a scholar to give lectures on the dangers of snake bites.
- 10) We will have our people make up healthy things for eating and drinking.

The Israelites could have done all of this stuff to no avail for **God's remedy was to simply look to the stand to live. It did not matter if one had just been bitten or was in an advanced stage - they needed to look so they could live.**

Jesus is making a powerful contextual point to Nicodemus and that is if you don't look at the cross you will perish. It doesn't matter what your education or intellect or accomplishments are. It doesn't matter about your baptism, catechism or public profession of faith. If you do not personally by faith look to that cross you will perish, you will die in your sins (John 8:26).

Christ was going to be lifted up in some way that would give life to all who would look to Him. Jesus Christ would be the anti-type of the bronze serpent. **This idea of Jesus being lifted up is a reference or euphemism to Him being nailed to a cross (John 8:28; 12:32-33*).** It was also used to Him being lifted up to glory (Acts 2:34; 5:31; Philippians 2:9). Take note of the word “must”, Christ “must” be lifted up. This is an absolute necessity for only if God descends and is lifted up is salvation possible. The One who is able to save you must descend from heaven, be lifted up on the cross and be lifted up into glory. This one must be God. He is the only One you must look to for salvation.

Christ's point is this - **the whole world has been bitten by sin. He would be lifted up on a cross and any person who is willing to look by faith to this one spot, to the cross-work of Jesus Christ for salvation, will be saved.** All you must do is admit you are a snake bitten sinner and look to Christ's cross-work to save you.

By the way, **in the Septuagint, which is the Greek text of the Old Testament, the verb "looked" in Numbers 21:9 is aorist tense, meaning all it took was one look at one point in time.** They could be saved by looking once. **That is all it takes to save a sinner from sin - you must look one time to Jesus Christ** for just one look to Him will save you from all your condemnatory sin. Don't rely on you to go to heaven, rely on Him to go to heaven. One look to Him is all it takes.

Now verse 15 is a purpose clause. This verse gives us the purpose or the reason for Jesus Christ descending from heaven and being lifted up on the cross, that whoever believes on Him may have eternal life. **Notice the eternal life is found "in Him", not "in you", "in me" or "in us."** If you will, by faith, look to Jesus Christ's work on the cross of Calvary, and believe He is the only One who can save you from your sin, you will be saved. God has provided a way for you to be healed of sin's deadly bite and His way is by faith look to Jesus Christ to save you. **You are saved by a simple look of faith, not by a complex system of works.**

ETERNAL REALITY #3 – God's love is what prompted God to send His only Heavenly Son into the world to be lifted up on the cross to provide salvation.
3:16-17

Now this is probably the most famous verse in all of the Bible and we carefully want to see what it does say and what it does not say. Martin Luther called John 3:16 "The Miniature Gospel."

The conjunction "for" which begins the verse gives further explanation of the previous verses. **Jesus Christ is the only Son who was begotten of God who came out of heaven as the God/Savior and John 3:16 explains why?** Why would a member of the Godhead actually leave "the heaven" to come here to a wretched sin cursed world to be lifted up on a cross? Contrary to what some religions teach, that we all existed in heaven before as some spirit and we came to this earth - Jesus Christ is the only One who really did. **In order for sinners to be saved, God must come in Person to provide an acceptable sacrifice that can save them.**

Now Christ is telling Nicodemus that He was going to be lifted up on a cross and the reason God the Father would permit His only begotten son to be lifted up on the cross was because He loved the world. Those words "only begotten" refer to the fact that Jesus Christ is uniquely the Son of God as no other will ever be. He is God's only Son sanctioned to come out of heaven to offer salvation. **Jesus Christ is the ONE AND ONLY GOD/SAVIOR. So God's love for sinners is what makes salvation possible. God has made an amazing provision for sinners, because He loves them. No matter who the sinner or what the sin, whoever believes on His Son will not perish, but have eternal life.**

The initiative for all salvation lies with God's love. It was true with Israel and it is true with us. God's love is the reason we have a chance to be saved from our sins.

Most sinners have a very distorted view of God in that they think their sinfulness means God hates them, is angry with them and wants to destroy them. The truth is - God loves sinners and even though they are sinners who have made a mess of things, God loves them so much that He has a plan to fix their sin mess. **However, the sin mess must be fixed God's way.**

The two “**must**” points of contextual importance, pertaining to everlasting life are these:

- 1) One **must** be born again to go to heaven. 3:7
- 2) Christ **must** be lifted up on the cross if one is to be born again. 3:14

The thing that motivated God to send His own Son Jesus Christ to the world to be lifted up on the cross was His love for sinful people who lived in the sinful world.

This is revolutionary because Israel never spoke of God loving the world, other than Israel and God specifically tells us we are not to love the world. The difference is that our love for the world is a matter of selfish participation, but God's love for the world is a matter of sacrificial redemption.

Now carefully notice what this verse does not say - this verse does not say God saved the world by love. This verse does not say God's love saves everyone in the world. **God's love does not save every sinner. The Scriptures are clear that it is God's grace that saves sinners, not love. God's love provides the sacrifice and the possibility whereby any sinner may be saved.** But in order for a person to be saved to experience the grace of God one must “believe in Christ” as your Savior. Your Creator will become your Savior. Your judge, will become your advocate, but you must believe in Him.

Carefully notice the relative pronoun “whoever.” John 3:16 says any sinner may believe. Mr. John Miles believed on Jesus Christ by putting his name there - “for God so loved John Miles.” Mr. Richard Baxter said he believed by not putting his name there. He said, had I read my name, I would have thought it was another Richard Baxter because I was so vile. But the pronoun “whoever” covers the worst of the Richard Baxters. It covers any person, every sin. **God's love makes salvation possible, but it does not make it personal.** In order for you to be personally saved, you must personally believe that the cross-work of Jesus Christ is the only thing that can save you from your sins and you must personally believe only in Jesus Christ to save you from your sins, as God's only provision.

The “for” of verse 17 gives further explanation of the reason for Christ's first coming. God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, which is exactly what the world deserves and which is exactly what the Jews were looking for, a Messianic judge who would put down all political forces and establish a kingdom. God initially sent His son to the world to offer a means of salvation. This was something most Jews did not believe they needed. People can be saved from their sins through faith in Him. Why should Christ show up first to condemn an already condemned world? He came to offer salvation. He came to provide salvation.

This is what the first coming of Jesus Christ was all about. Now the second coming will be very different. The next time Christ comes to this earth, He will come as Judge and Jury and Executioner.

The thing that motivated the Godhead to not come and judge the world the first time but provide a means of salvation for the world was the love of God. Dr. Walter Wilson used to say no one but God could possibly love everyone in the world for we even have a difficult time loving some of our own relatives (R. L. Moyer, *John 3:16*, p. 31).

Think about this - God loves the world - The Americans, the Dutch, the Australians, the Germans, the Swedes, the Irish, the Africans, the Turks, the Italians, the Swiss, the Greeks, the Jews, the Arabs, the Mexicans, the Canadians, the Polynesians and the Russians. God loves white people, black people, red people, yellow people, brown people and all mixtures of people. He loves the civilized and the savage. He loves the cultured and the crude. He loves the strong and the weak, the ruler and the slave. Over six billion people in the world now and God loves them all and will save any who will respond to His love.

ETERNAL REALITY #4 – Every person in the world is classified by God into one of two categories. 3:18

In God's mind there are two main systems of belief when it comes to salvation: 1) Those who rely only upon Christ ; 2) Those who rely only upon self .

When it comes to judgment, every person in the world, every person here falls into one of these two categories according to God: **Category #1** - the believer in Christ who is not heading to eternal judgment. The believer has been acquitted of condemnatory charges because he has believed in Jesus Christ. **Category #2** - the person who has not believed on Jesus Christ who is already judged as condemned and is heading to eternal condemnation.

Christians tend to say that if you don't believe on Jesus Christ you "will be" condemned. The truth is if you don't believe on Christ you are already condemned. Listen, if you have not trusted in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, you are condemned already by every sin you have ever committed. You are a spiritual zombie walking through life waiting for the moment you go into eternity to condemnation. Some people say, well, we really won't know until we get there. Listen, if you have not personally believed on Jesus Christ, you can know right now you are already condemned.

There are a group of people who postulate the view that God loves everybody. This is partly true. God loved everyone enough to provide salvation through His Son. But if you reject His Son, you are not loved by God, you are judged by God as guilty and condemned and you are alienated from God and you are heading to the wrath of God. We begin to understand something about the love of God when we realize the whole world is already condemned.

Jesus Christ went to the cross to save condemned sinners from their sins and from God's condemnation. But if you refuse to believe only in Jesus Christ to save you, you are heading to the wrath of God. But if you will believe in Him, there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Notice all you must do is believe in Christ's name to save you. There is no other name under heaven by which one may be saved (Acts 4:12). It is Jesus, the God/Savior, who came out of heaven, who will save you from your sins if you will believe in His name. Stop believing in your name and start trusting in His.

ETERNAL REALITY #5 – Most people in the world will not believe on Jesus Christ.
3:19-21

Now Nicodemus must have been thinking if Jesus is the only means of salvation and all we must do to be saved is to believe on Him then why don't all people in the world believe? After all the issue is everlasting life.

Christ gives the answer right here - men love darkness rather than Light. Some love darkness so much they will live in it forever. They love to rely on their own evil sinful works rather than on His pure sacrifice. People who love their sin, do not love the truth of the Word of God. When you get into the Word of God it exposes your sin. A sinner who loves his sin hates the Light of God because it reveals to him his own misery, his own corruption, his own guilt, his own deserved punishment and it forces him to face the truth about himself and he hates it.

Jesus Christ was the Word of God and His presence exposed sin and people hated Him. God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, but most people in the world are not going to come to Christ to be saved because they love their sin more than Him.

Truth oriented people will be drawn into the Word of God. People who are living in sin and loving their sin will not. Those who are truthful acknowledge the fact that they are sinners and need God's help and they come to the light and love of God.

The whole world is in sin and since most people in the world excuse their sin and love their sin they will not believe on Jesus Christ. The question is, will you? Whoever you are, whatever you have done - God loves you and has provided salvation for you.

John 3:16 is perhaps the greatest single verse in the entire Bible:

- 1) It offers the Greatest love - God **loved** a sin-filled world.
- 2) It offers the Greatest gift - God **gave** His only begotten Son.
- 3) It offers the Greatest opportunity for all people - **whoever** will believe.
- 4) It offers the Greatest escape - **shall not perish**.
- 5) It offers the Greatest destiny - **will have everlasting life**.

This world is so temporal in its focus. Millions of dollars are spent on paint that will keep wood from perishing, on medicine that will keep a body from perishing, on tombstones that keep a memory from perishing, on caskets to keep a corpse from perishing, on vaccinations that will keep animals from perishing - but most think little about the most important thing of all - their own soul. What will keep your soul from perishing? God gave His Son to keep your soul from perishing.

Will you acknowledge that you are a snake-bitten sinner? Will you acknowledge to God now that you will receive His Son into your life? Will you look one time to the cross of Jesus Christ and live?