

God So Loved the World

That You May Believe

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Bible Text: John 3

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Beautiful. What a lead-in to our text this evening in John 3:15. Words that are very familiar to church going people and I wonder how well understood, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

The background to the verses goes further back than when they were first spoken, back in the days of Moses, the great leader of Israel. After Israel had been delivered from her slavery of over 400 years in Egypt, had been spared the angel of death who had come to visit every home in Egypt, had crossed the Red Sea and seen Pharaoh's army defeated and finally, found safety from marauding attacks in the wilderness, those same people who had seen so much of the activity of God, had seen so much of the hand of God upon them, started to complain and particularly to murmur and be disgruntled against their leader, Moses. They were to do that, really, off and on for about 40 years. This murmuring, one of the words that's used to describe it, a kind of subterranean disgruntlement would be a manifestation of a fundamental rebellion in the hearts of the people, hearts of people who directed their antagonism against God's servant, Moses, but ultimately against God himself.

Here in John's gospel, we find the Lord Jesus in his coming into the world, fulfills certain functions and offices. He comes, for example we read in the first chapter, as a second Moses. So, in chapter 1:17 we're told this, “The law was given through Moses but grace and peace came through Jesus Christ.” Just as Moses, when he came to lead Israel, found resistance from the people of Israel, so did Jesus. In 1:11, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” But, of course, it was far more serious in Jesus' day than it was in Moses' day for as John has shown us in this gospel already, this second Moses is of far greater significance than the first Moses whereas the first Moses was a servant of God, the second Moses is the Son of God. From the beginning of the gospel, he is the Word, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He was with God in the beginning and all things were made by him. So, the sin of this generation in which Jesus lives is going to be far greater than the sin of the people in Moses' day.

So, we come to chapter 3 of John's gospel and we find a man called Nicodemus. He represents the Jewish ruling council; he comes, in a sense, speaking on their behalf. He comes to comment on the ministry of Jesus; he comes commenting on the signs and wonders that Jesus had performed. Signs and wonders reminiscent of that first Moses and he questions Jesus. He questions where he comes from, just as Israel had done with Moses so Nicodemus does with Jesus. "We see you doing these signs and wonders but we want to know where you come from because nobody can do these things normally unless God is with them and we want to know in what sense God is with you."

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, this man Nicodemus and his colleagues were setting themselves up as judges of Jesus. They wanted to evaluate Jesus and by doing so, they were repeating exactly the same sin as Israel had done before: standing in judgment of God and standing in judgment of God's servant, Moses. But these were not neutral judges as they thought themselves to be, nor were they qualified to render a verdict on the merits or otherwise of Jesus' claims. Nicodemus in this conversation in John 3 discovers that instead of him judging Jesus, Jesus is evaluating him. To his utter surprise, Jesus says to him that in order to see, far less enter, the kingdom of God something radical and something fundamental had to happen in the life of Nicodemus and his friends. A new creation. They had to be born again, born from above which explains and expounds as meaning born of water and of spirit, that is, cleansing and renewal by the power of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus presses this upon this man, Nicodemus and those he represents. He had come saying to Jesus, "We see your signs and wonders." Jesus responds personally to this man, he says in verse 7, "You," you people, that is, plural, "you people must be born again, born from above." He says again to him, "You," you people, "do not accept our testimony," both plural. He's addressing Nicodemus and he's addressing the people for whom Nicodemus is speaking.

Then he turns the attention onto himself. He is, in fact, the Lord from heaven. Nicodemus had asked implicitly, "No man can do these things unless God is with him." He's asking: in what sense is God with you? And what Jesus is now saying to Nicodemus is, "My being here means that God is with you. I am the Lord from heaven." He has broken into this world. There are a number of hints and clues in the passage as to how Jesus sees himself. He calls himself the second, the last Adam. Here's another title that he's taking on himself. He calls himself the Son of man, the son of Adam. That's taken from Daniel 7 and in Daniel 7 the Son of man, the son of Adam is a heavenly being to whom is given a kingdom and authority. And he's saying to this man, "I am qualified to tell you about these things that I've just spoken about. Qualified not because I've been through the same schools as you but qualified because I have come down from heaven to tell you this. I am this heavenly being in Daniel's vision. Yes, I am a son of Adam, born of human flesh, but I'm also this heavenly being uniquely qualified to tell you about heavenly things." He's the eternal Word.

Earlier on in 1:18, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." Now, what Jesus is saying to this man is, "This new creation

that you need, that everybody needs if they're ever going to see or understand God and enter the kingdom of heaven, this new creation, I am qualified to tell you about and I'm qualified to give you because I am the Lord from heaven." And it's in that context that Jesus takes Nicodemus to show him precisely what is going on in this interaction they're having with each other. He takes Nicodemus to one of those incidents of murmuring and disgruntlement with the people of Israel against Moses and against God. He takes him to Numbers 21 and in that passage, there is a recounting of a period, one of those periods, where the people were agitating, rebelling against Moses, rebelling against God and God sends poisonous snakes to judge the people.

The connection between that story and Nicodemus' story is that Nicodemus and his friends were in danger of repeating Israel's mistake. But in a deeper sense. They were in danger of rejecting God's final revelation. God had spoken through Moses, Moses was the great prophet. He is the one who gives us the first five books of the Bible. He is the vehicle of stupendous revelation. He is the one who reveals to us the first things but now here is the second Moses who has come onto the scene and he is going to tell us, he's going to reveal to us, the last things. The ends of the ages have come with Jesus. The last days have arrived with Jesus. He has come onto the scene. By rejecting God's final revelation in Christ, they were in danger not simply of physical death as those people were in the desert so long ago, these people were in danger of eternal death. Eternal death because they were rejecting the Messiah Jesus.

Well, at that point in Numbers 21, at Moses' intercession, God sends salvation by way of a snake lifted up on a pole and that provided for those who looked to the snake at the invitation of Moses, physical life. Jesus says, "That was a pointer. It was a pointer to what God was going to do in this present age." He is going to provide a way of salvation for those who are dying in sin and that will provide for them not physical life merely, but eternal life. That is, the life of the age to come. Resurrection life which begins now with a spiritual rebirth and renewal and culminates in a resurrection body in a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus will be elevated to a cross. He will become the means of salvation. People must look to him if they are to be saved from judgment.

So, as we approach this 16th verse, we reach the climax of that first introduction in verse 15 where it says, "Everyone who believes," literally this is what it says in the Greek, "Everyone who believes may have in him," that is, in Jesus, "eternal life. Everyone who believes may have in him eternal life." The life of the age to come, eternal life, resurrection life, is found only in Jesus. So, here's the flow of the passage, absolutely vital that you have it in your head: Jesus is talking about the potential of a spiritual new creation, a regeneration, a new birth. It wasn't a brand new idea. Nicodemus should have recognized this as always what God has been doing in people's lives wherever even in the Old Testament God is producing faith in Jesus, wherever people in the Old Testament believe the promises of God and walk in faith, wherever we see Abraham believing God, we're to see the evidence of this new birth, the evidence of this regeneration in their lives bringing them to a relationship with God.

That's why the Apostle Paul, for example, can pick out an incident in the life of Abraham and talk about these two women, Hagar and Sarah, and he can say about those two women and their offspring that their offspring were born, one of the flesh, Hagar and Ishmael, while the other one, Sarah, had a child called Isaac and Paul says in Galatians 4, "He was born according to the Spirit." There was a spiritual rebirth; Isaac was someone who knew God, was one of God's elect who had a living relationship with God.

So, the Spirit has been at work all through the Old Testament but what is distinctive now? What is Jesus pointing to here when he talks about the Spirit? He is saying what is new about the New Testament is that it's the New Testament. The Messiah has come. Now the Holy Spirit's ministry is going to be up front and center only in this respect: in that he points to and connects people with Jesus, the Messiah and connects them to the work of Jesus on the cross.

Here's a question: why has God made eternal life available? "For," that's key, "for God so loved the world." Three things that that verse talks about: how God loves, how God gives and how God works. How God loves: "For God so loved the world." Do you see the flow of the passage? God made a new creation possible. Cleansing, renewal, eternal life, all possible through the uplifting of the Son of man and he does so out of sheer love. For just as the new birth and eternal life is grounded on the lifting up of the Son of man onto the cross, so the lifting up of the Son of man on the cross is grounded on the love of God.

Now, this is the only time in John's gospel that God has said to love the world and the Scriptures speak about God's love in different ways. You all know this. There is a great little book, it's a very small little book so most of you could read it. It's very, very short and it's called "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God" and it's written by a friend of mine, Don Carson. In that book, Dr. Carson delineates the ways in which the love of God is talked about in the New Testament. So, for example, you have the unique love of God the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father. Twice in this gospel John says that the Father loves the Son. Once he uses the word "agape," the Father loves the Son. The other time it's a different word, it's the word "phileo," he loves the Son. So, whatever way you interpret love, he loves the Son in every way possible.

In this gospel, it says that Jesus loves the Father. In fact, it's in this gospel that we have an insight into the intra-Trinitarian love of God: the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, bound together by the work of the Holy Spirit. It's a beautiful picture in the gospel. In fact, it's John's particular insight that love always has to have an object and that from all eternity within the God-head, love always had an object, the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father. Which is why John says it is possible to say about God something which no other religion can say about God: God is love. Because it belongs to the Trinitarian nature of God that there has been from all eternity a love relationship within the very being of God himself. God is love.

So, there is that unique love of the Father and the Son. There is the providential love of God for everything that God has made. This is one of the things that you find throughout the Bible because the Creator takes delight in his creation, he calls it good and even very

good in the beginning of the Bible. We see that the Father sees the fall of the sparrow; he cares for the fall of the sparrow. Indeed, he ordains the fall of the sparrow. He is concerned about nature and the animals and the earth and the flowers and he feeds the hungry animals and he clothes the earth with flowers. Jesus builds an argument on that: if God looks after these trivial little things, how much more is he not going to look after you. The providential love of God.

Then there's the particular love of God for his elect. Yes, God has an elect people. In the Bible sometimes it's the nation of Israel, sometimes it's the church as a whole, sometimes it's individuals. All the time when we talk about the love of God for his elect, it's always a different kind of love. You think of the language that God uses when he's talking to Israel in Deuteronomy 7 and again in Deuteronomy 10 when he says to Israel this, "It's not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you. You were the fewest of all the peoples. It's because the Lord loves you and is keeping his oath that he swore to your fathers. He loves you because he chose to love you. Not because you were lovable but because he chose to set his love and choose you." The love of God is described as if it in itself is the choice. By setting this particular love on you he chooses you. He chooses you. Again, Deuteronomy 10, "Behold, to the Lord your God belongs heaven and the heaven of heavens and the earth and all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart," isn't that a lovely picture? "Set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them." He set his heart in love upon you.

Now, these passages teach that there is nothing in the elect that prompt this love. It's a free, unearned love and so you go to the New Testament and you find this is precisely the way in which election is described, "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ." The particular love of God for his elect.

We can also talk about the provisional love of God for his obedient people. The particular love of God for his elect is absolutely unconditional. It's eternal. Once he chooses, he keeps you but there is another kind of love that God has that is provisional and it's within his own peoples and his relationship with his people. It's a provisional love. We don't often talk about this one because we're scared to because it sounds dodgy but it's in the Bible. We might call this not a love of salvation but a love of delight because this love of delight is mutable, that is, it's changeable. It can be more or less depending on what? Depending on our obedience. So, Jesus says in this gospel, he says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love." Now, why does he say that? Is he saying that we'd be lost? No, he's not talking about being lost. He is talking to people who are already his people but he's saying, "It's possible for you to be robbed of the delight that you give God if you don't remain in his love." Then he goes on to explain, "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

There is an aspect of the love of God for his very own people that you and I test by our disobedience and that you and I heighten by our obedience. It's the love of delight. "I love it when you wear those clothes. I love it when you help me do the dishes in the

kitchen.” You know, those things: “I love it when you tidy up after you.” It's not going to affect the relationship but it certainly helps the relationship if you know what it is the other person loves about you. They'll love you more when you think about those, “I love it when you bring me flowers.” That's not me, by the way. My wife loves it when I bring her flowers. It's the love of delight. It's that provisional love within the relationship. The relationship doesn't alter but the enjoyment of the relationship in terms of God's enjoyment of it and our enjoyment of it, does mutate.

Then there is the generous love of God towards a fallen world. We know that from the beginning of the Bible story, God had plans for the world. Adam was to be fruitful and multiply and fill it with image-bearers of God but he failed, he fell and he frustrated the plan. Then Abraham, God resumes the plan and he promises a seed or offspring through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. You see the way in which God loves the world: “God so loved the world.” The emphasis there if you want to underline it is on that word “so,” he so loved the world. This was a slap in the face to this religious leader because he and his colleagues were familiar with the idea that God loved Israel, they could accept that. Sometimes they believed God loved Israel without any provisional aspect to it. They could understand God loving his own people but God's love extends to the world.

Now, we have to ask the question: what does John mean by “the word?” In John's writings both in his gospel and in his epistles, he has a very specific way of using this word “world.” It's usually negative. Usually he's not referring so much to the size of the world as the sin of the world. He's not so much emphasizing its bigness but its badness. Later on in John 17 we find this spelled out. Jesus says he calls his people out of the world. He keeps his people safe while they are in the world. Later in his epistle, John will say, “The whole world lies like a man lounging in the arms of a prostitute, lies in the arms of the world, a sinful world, a plaything of the world.” In John 17, “Jesus after he had spoken these words lifted up his eyes to heaven to his Father and said, Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son that he may glorify you since you've given him authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all those you've given him. I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world.” Yours they were, you gave them to me, they've kept your word, I'm not praying for the world but for those you have given me out of the world for they are yours.

In John's gospel, the word “world” refers to the moral order in its willful, culpable, rebellion against God and that's the way we were led to think about the world right at the beginning of John's gospel. In chapter 1, “The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made by him and the world did not know him.” God so loved a fallen world. The people that he chooses, he chooses out of a world, a fallen people. God so loved the world. That's how God loves, how God gives. God so loved the world. How much did he love that world of fallen people? He loved it so much that he gave his one and only Son.

God gave the law to Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. God gave the land to Israel but here God gives inestimably more. Here is a major escalation in the love of God, in the

giving of God. What John 3:16 teaches us is that the love of God is most demonstrated, demonstrated most clearly in the cost to God himself for the salvation of men is the sacrifice of God himself to make a relationship with him possible for men and women. God so loved the world that he gave. That's the key, that's the major escalation of this love. There is sacrifice involved. The word "so" underlines the measure of God's love which in the context, is all about the uplifting of the Son, the Son who is lifted up. Lifted up was he to die. "It is finished," was his cry. That whole process introduced for us just in the previous verses. God so loved the world that he gave his Son up to be the one who would be hoisted in a pole in order that we might have salvation.

The very language here is taken straight out of the book of Genesis. You will notice that in this chapter that so many references to Genesis and to Moses and it's taken right out of the book of Genesis written by Moses, the pivotal story of Abraham, the father of the faithful because we read this in Genesis 22 that there was a time when God tested Abraham and came to him and said, "Abraham." He said, "Here I am." God said to him, "I want you to do this, I want you to take your son, your only son, Isaac, the one you've waited for for so long, so long your wife was way past the ability to have children. So long you waited that you would have a son with Sarah and you waited 100 years in order to have that boy, Isaac, whom you love." Do you see the way in which God is cranking up the sheer magnitude of what he's asking this man to do? He's asking him to take his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loves and go out to the land of Moriah, actually go to the very hill on which Jerusalem would later be built, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall tell you.

What a staggering thing for God to ask this man to do. It staggers us. We think of the morality of it. We wonder at it all. We should wonder at it all. Abraham goes out in faith. He takes his one-of-a-kind son, Isaac, and you know the story: at the last moment, Isaac is spared because God provides a substitute. Abraham had the faith to see that. As they're getting near, Isaac who is about 18-19, a big strapping boy. He's not going to just submit to anything his Dad says and he's saying to his Dad, "Where is the sacrifice?" His father says to him, "God will provide a lamb, my son."

But do you see this? The God who spared Abraham's son, the God who intervened and provided a lamb to die in Abraham's son, Isaac's place, does not spare his only Son. Paul picks this theme up in Romans 8 when he says, "He did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all that we also with him may graciously receive all things." John in this gospel has identified that Jesus is the Lamb who dies in the place of Isaacs, of sinners, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In this context, God is giving his Son to be lifted up like the snake in the wilderness. He would be lifted up to the cross. He would be pinned to the cross. Can you image? Can you imagine our human reaction to the cruel and vicious death of the much-loved child? But for God the pain runs deeper because it isn't just the physical agonies through which Jesus goes. Beyond the physical agonies there are the spiritual agonies of a perfect soul exposed to the heinous crimes of a humanity in rebellion against God and there is above all, the agony of the Son who has always known perfect face-to-face fellowship with his Father from all eternity, on that cross at that moment, finding a darkness descend and the relationship be obscured and as

it were, to use our language though not the Bible's language, the Father turns his face away. In anguish not in anger at his Son because I tell you, at that moment when Jesus in that mid-day midnight, bore the sins of his people, at that moment when he faced the wrath of God due to them, I tell you this: his Father never loved him more than he loved him at that moment. If there is something in God that is mutable about his love, he loved his Son in a new way in his humanity and he loved him more because he was obedient to death, even the death of a cross as he bears our sin on his own body on the tree. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. This text leaves us wondering, marveling, worshiping at the magnitude of the gift.

The third thing to see: how God loves, how God gives, how God works. What is the purpose of the love of God for the world and the gift of his Son? Look at this: "That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Do you see the alternatives before us this evening, men and women? Dear friends, perishing or eternal life and what makes the difference? Believing in him. Believing in him. All that God does for the world that is fallen, he does for those who will believe in Jesus. Do you see that? That is the purpose clause in this statement: he does for the sake of those who will believe in Jesus unto eternal life.

What does that belief involve? David Wells sums it up: "It is both belief in the promise made and commitment to the promise maker." That sounds very good when David Wells wrote it. I'd like to change it. I think it's: belief in the promise made and trust resting in the promise maker. Just like Abraham, he believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Here we have the proposition that the God and Father of Jesus Christ says that he will give eternal life to those who believe in Jesus, who trust in Jesus. Maybe you're not there yet. Maybe you're on your way there. Maybe you've arrived at the point where you're ready to do that. Maybe you do that already. Rejoice in it. Wonder at it. Worship God for it that God so loved the world to bring you to this place where you believe into the Lord Jesus.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for the sweetness of your promises to us and the sheer magnitude of these very simple words that tell us that you love this fallen world for the sake of those who would believe in Jesus. We praise you that today many of us here have placed all that we are and have and hope to be in him and ask that if there is someone struggling with that, that you would help them to see through, perhaps go to one of these unscripted evenings in the pub and ask the questions that are on their minds and hearts. Or perhaps tonight calling your name and say, "Oh God, if you're real, please make yourself known to me." Father, we pray that those of us who believe may be thrilled to the very depths of our being that you set your love upon us before the foundation of the world and help us to rejoice and be glad and to heed the invitation to come again and again to you through Jesus Christ our Lord in whose name we pray. Amen.

