

O Lord God, almighty maker of heaven and earth, we come before you now to your word and pray for the help of your spirit. We have no wisdom of our own, no strength, no knowledge, no righteousness, no power to affect any change in the soul of any man, woman, or boy or girl gathered in this place. But when you speak, O Lord God, the voice of the Lord is powerful. The voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars. Yes, the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. and so cause your voice to be felt and heard in this place today, that your heart toward a lost world would be revealed, that you would save the lost, restore the backslider, and build up your people in our most holy faith. For Jesus' sake, amen. Please take your seats. If you would, turn with me in your copy of the Word of God to John's Gospel, and we'll begin our reading in verse in verse 11, and we'll read down to verse 18. Hear the words of the Lord Christ, and please take heed how you hear. Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, his only begotten Son, that whoever receives, sorry, whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever therefore believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he's not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. Amen. The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the Word of God endures forever. Well, we come this morning to what is perhaps the greatest verse in all the Bible. And there was a time when I did not know this verse existed. I remember watching a soccer match, I think I was about 11 years of age, back in Northern Ireland, and I think it was Liverpool playing somebody, and there was a corner kick, and as the footballer was taking the corner, I noticed behind him in the stands, a man was holding up a white placard, and on that white placard were the words John 3, 16. I knew it was a reference to the Bible, I just didn't know what it referred to, and I didn't bother looking it up. I was so engrossed in the soccer match, it didn't seem to matter that much to me. I wonder, is that you this morning?

I find it hard to believe that someone at First Presbyterian Church wouldn't know the words of John 3, 16, that God so loved

the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Well, perhaps there is someone here who's never heard those words before. Well, you've heard them today, and you will hear them. Or more likely, maybe you've heard these words a thousand times, but they've not actually touched your heart. They've not actually captured your focus and stormed the citadel of your heart to engage the full intent of your soul. And it's my prayer this morning, as we look at these words together, that it'll have that effect upon you. It'll capture your heart. For we come, Luther says, to the heart of the Bible, the gospel in miniature. I would say more than just the heart of the Bible, these words represent and reveal the very heart of God himself, the root of the gospel. If you're following Christ's logic here, and Christ has been speaking to Nicodemus, and he's talking about the Son of Man coming down. No one from earth has ascended into heaven. except he who descended from heaven the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." Notice what John is saying. He says, Christ descended. Why did he descend? He descended from heaven so that as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a stick, Christ might be lifted up upon the cross to die. He descended that he might be lifted up, not back to heaven again, that'll come later, but that he might be lifted up on the cross. You remember the story, if you don't, you can turn there, Numbers 21, verse 4. Egypt or Israel are wandering

in the wilderness yet again. And they're grumbling yet again. From Mount Hor, they set out by the way to the Red Sea, that's verse four if you're reading, to go around the land of Edom, and the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there's no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food. This is monstrous ingratitude. God had already provided the manna. He'd already provided the quail. He'd already struck the rock and provided water from the rock for them to drink. He'd supplied all of their need every step of the way as they went from Egypt toward the promised land. But it was not enough. They were always prone to grumble. and to demand fresh evidence of God's care and His love. Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people. Remember, they wanted to go back to Egypt, and the serpent was the picture of Egypt. Tutankhamun's headdress was a cobra ready to strike. And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, we have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord that he take

away the serpents from us. So Moses prayed for the people, and the Lord said to Moses, make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. and everyone who is bitten when he sees it shall live. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live." So the serpents were a judgment of God. And the answer to the judgment of God was the lifting up of a picture of the judgment of God upon the pole, the serpent. And Jesus says, As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. We're all under judgment, the Bible says, and the answer to that judgment is not just the picture of judgment, but it's reality. As Christ hangs on the cross naked under the wrath and curse of God, the gospel for you and for me is the same as the gospel in the days of Moses. Look and live. What could be simpler than that? And our text this morning answers the question, why would God do that? Why would God send his son into this world to receive the judgment that we deserve? What motivated him? What moved the hand of God Almighty to send such a son to be such a savior from such a calamity? And the Bible says the reason God sent him was his heart, and it was one made up all of love. Why would God do this, verse 16? For, he's explaining the previous verses, for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. It's the greatest verse in the Bible, and I've got the best outline. Now, it's not mine. When I was back at RTS, Dr. Thomas came to class from a conference, I think it was the Banner Conference, and he said, boys, heard the best outline of John 3.16. They asked all the speakers to give their best outline, and they all tried. I never actually heard who gave the outline. It might have come to Dr. Thomas himself, and he was being modest. But he said, I heard the best outline for John 3.16. And having heard it, I've never been able to forget it. So I shamelessly use it this morning in our text. God loves the worst. He gives the most, and He asks the least. God loves the worst, the world. He gives the most, His only begotten Son, and He asks the least that you put your faith in Him. It's a wonderful outline. And we'll walk through it together this morning. First of all, God loves the worst. For God so loved the world. Now many Calvinists, and if you're new to the Presbyterian faith this morning, don't panic. But many Calvinists get their theological pantyhose in a twist over this because we do believe that God has a particular love for the church And he loved us not because we were lovable, he loved us because he was lovely. And he gave his son, and Christ died, he gave himself for us. in a particular act of love, not because we were special or deserved that, but because of God's goodness and mercy, we were just as sinful, we hated

him just like the rest of the world, and yet God sent his son to die for his bride. We believe that, and I believe that, and yet this verse describes God's love, not just his particular love for his people, but a love that is wide enough to embrace any and all who will come to his son. For God so loved the world that whosoever, that's a promise for anyone to hear. The only qualification you need to receive the promise of this verse is to be a member of the world, and as such a sinful member of that world, we all are on the road to perishing. For God so loved the world. And if your Calvinism is too small for that this morning, your Calvinism is too small. In John's mind, the world here is a bad place and a big place. It's first and foremost a bad place. When you read John's writings, John uses the word world not to describe the created order, but human society arrayed against God in rebellion. The world is a place that does not know its creator. We're told in John 1 verse 10, he was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. The world was made through him, but the world did not know him. The world lives in appalling ignorance of God. It's a place, too, of darkness, where the light of God shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it or overcome it, depending on how you take that verb. It's a place, John says in this chapter here, where men love the darkness more than the light. This is the judgment, verse 19. The light has come into the world, and people, men, love the darkness rather than the light because their works, their deeds, we're evil. The world is a place, too, that's under judgment and to some extent under the thralldom of satanic power. In John 12, 31, John says, now is the judgment of this world. Now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And lastly, it's a place that's driven by lust and defined by pride. 1 John 2, 15 to 17, John says, do not love the world or the things in the world for all that is of the world, the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh and the pride of life is not from the Father but is from the world and this world is passing away and its lust. But he who does the will of God abides forever. So it's defined by lust, the lust of the eyes, what looks good, the lust of the flesh, what feels good, That's what drives the world, what looks good, what feels good. That's all that matters. And then what makes me seem big and sensual, defined by pride, the clanging, boastful pride of life. That's the world, driven by lust and defined by pride, and it's passing away. It's a bad place. So the main idea here is not so much that the world is so big that God should love all of it, but that the world is so bad that God could love any of it. And yet John says God loves the world. It's also a big place. John's writing, you remember, an evangelistic tract, I think, aimed primarily

at the Jews. He begins with that echo of the Jewish scriptures, in the beginning was the Word, in the beginning was God. In Genesis 1 and John 1, there's lots of echoes of Judaism and the problems of Judaism in the Gospel of John. And the Jews prided themselves, of course, that God loved them. Remember, in Deuteronomy 7, we're told, the Lord did not set his love on you, nor choose you, because you were more in love than any of the peoples. For you were the fewest of all the peoples. But because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which he swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. But the Jews would say, yes, but the Lord loves us. He loves us in a way that he doesn't love the Philistines or the Amalekites and all those otherites in the Old Testament. And there was truth to that. God has a special particular love for the Jewish nation. Even today, the gospel goes to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, Paul says in Romans 1. But here, And the Jews would never say that God loved the world. And John says it, I think, to kind of blow the Jews' mind, that there's an overflowing goodness in the heart of God that's big enough and good enough and wide enough to reach out to every creature under heaven and by deed and grant to offer them the gospel. And it's very important that you realize that. One of the dangers, one of the ways the devil likes to twist the truth of Calvinism is to say, well you can't, if you aren't one of the elect, you can't come to Christ. And technically, There is truth there. God's gonna draw the elect to Christ. But the devil loves to use that to hurt the souls of people as they hear the gospel and begin to worry, well, if I'm not one of God's chosen ones, it doesn't matter what I do, I can't come. And they get caught up in the narthex of the gospel when the gospel calls us to come all the way down to the throne of grace because the gospel is never offered, not once, to those who know they are the elect. The gospel is offered to sinners. Pure and simple. Christ came into the world to save sinners. Are you a sinner? Then Christ, you can be confident, Christ is offering himself to you. Are you a member of the world this morning? That's all you need. That's the only qualification you need to come to Christ and receive him. There's no work required of you, no qualification required to you except your unworthiness. We have a God this morning who reaches out to a lost and dying world, and he says, I love you. Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. I'll not cast you out. Come to me, and I will gather you in. God loves the worst. He loves the world. He also gives

the most His only begotten Son. And the word only begotten, monogenes in the Greek, carries the idea of the uniqueness of Christ, His preciousness. If the Son of Man stresses His deity, His place at the Father's right hand as the Lord of the cosmos, Here he's pictured as the son of God, and it stresses his place in the father's heart. John Flavell, the Puritan, or Flavell, depending how you pronounce it, John Flavell says, what is a child but a piece of the parent wrapped up in another's skin? Isn't that lovely? What is a child but a piece of the parent wrapped up in another's skin? I sometimes tell my children, especially when they're mad at me, never justly, of course, but whenever they're mad at me, I'll tell them, you know, there's a very short list of people who would run into a burning building to rescue you. who would run through the flames and be burnt themselves to get to you and rescue you. Firefighters will do it because it's their job. Your mother and I will do it because it's our heart. We love you. Never forget that, children. A very short list of people who would give their lives without a thought to save you. And your mom and your dad and your grandmother and your grandfather are top of that list. You're a little piece of them wrapped up in your skin." And Flavel goes on, "'Yet our dearest children are but as strangers to us in comparison of the unspeakable dearness that was betwixt the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.'" Stephen Charnock, another Puritan, said, at the cross, we see a more expensive goodness than was laid out in creation. For at the cross, God must be made man, eternity must suffer death, the Lord of angels must weep in a cradle, that's back in Bethlehem, and the king of kings must hang as a slave. This is the one the Father gave His Son. And He was given. He wasn't wrenched grudgingly from His hand. He was given freely from His heart. And notice that John stresses the warmth and size of the father's heart by the price he was willing to pay. God so loved the world that he gave. How big is the father's love? Well, look at what the father gave. Look who he gave. Look where he sent him. He sent his son, his only son, to the cross. The Scots have a saying that you have mountains and you have lochs. The lochs are like a lake at the bottom of the mountain. The loch is as deep down as the mountain above it is high. How do you measure the depth of the loch? You look at the height of the mountain. How do you measure the size of God's heart, the extent of his love? Look at the cross. He sent his son from the pinnacle of heaven to the pit of hell to rescue a world that hated him. Do you find it hard to believe that God loves you? You say, well, of course I do, because I'm so ugly, you might say. Am I so? God doesn't love you because you're beautiful. He loves you because he is beautiful. He doesn't love you because you are good. He loves you because he is good. See, our love's different from

God's. Our love has to flow towards something that is attractive in the object. And because it is lovely, we love it. With God, it's exactly the reverse. God does love lovely things like his son, but there's such goodness in God's heart that his love is able to extend to the unlovely and the horrible and the ugly. And it's because he loves us that we will one day become lovely, but his heart is so big and so vast and so warm that he can even love the world that hates him. And if you can love the world, Christian, then surely He can love you, and He does love you, the Bible says. And until you realize that, your heart will never truly be warmed by anything you ever learn about God. You'll always be left hiding behind the trees in the garden like Adam and Eve. But the God of the Bible, He loves the worst, and you know that because He gave the most. He gave His only begotten Son. 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 wandering child is reconciled by God's beloved son. The aching soul again made whole and priceless pardon won. when ancient times shall pass away and human thrones and kingdoms fall, when those who hear refuse to pray on rocks and hills and mountains call, God's love so sure shall still endure, all measureless and strong. Grace will resound the whole earth round, the saints' and angels' song. Could we with ink the ocean fill, And where the skies of parchment made, And where every stalk on earth a quill, And every man by trade a scribe, 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." God loves the worst. He gives the most, and lastly, He asks the least, that you trust Him. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Notice the contrast, perishing, what you deserve, everlasting life, what God offers, and the condition, you trust Him. That's the only way to escape perishing. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he's not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. Whoever is a small word, but it's bigger than all the world, whoever. If you're a Muslim here this morning, or a Buddhist or a Hindu, if you don't believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, you will be condemned and you will perish. If you're a Roman Catholic here this morning, and you don't believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you will perish. If you're a Presbyterian here this morning, or any other Protestant sect, and you don't believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you will perish. The only way to escape condemnation and eternal perishing is to put your trust in Jesus. And the moment you do, you become a possessor of eternal life. Think about that. Think of how little God is just asking you to put your trust. And it's not, you know, the devil

loves to come and he wants you to look at your faith. Is your faith strong enough? The strength of your faith doesn't matter. It's the strength of your Savior. A weak faith brings a strong Christ. Don't look at your faith. Send your faith to look at your Savior. That's the secret. Think about that. He's asking you simply to trust him. I'm listening to a book at the moment called A Small History of the Whole World. And it's a wonderful little book. I think that's the name of it. If it's not, I'll find it. But it's a wonderful little book. And I'm at the part about Alexander the Great. And Alexander the Great, of course, wanted to conquer the whole world. And he heads out into Asia Minor and into Palestine. He conquers Egypt. Then he goes out to Persia. He conquers the Assyrians and the Babylonians. And still not content with more worlds left to conquer, he heads out to India. It's a long way away. And he brings his soldiers down into India in 327 BC. And the Indians refuse to submit to him. And he meets King Porus at the Indus River, and King Porus with his army, massive army of war elephants on the far side of the bank of the Indus River, and Alexander the Great has to swim the river with his men to get to the far side, even to begin the fight, under a hail of Indian arrows. Well, they do that, they get out of the far side of the river, and they give the Indians a thorough thrashing. And there's a great victory, Alexander wins, and they bring King Porus to him in chains. And there's an amazing conversation. Here's King Porus brought on his knees in chains to Alexander the Great. Alexander asks him, what do you want of me? And King Porus, who's a defeated king, looks at him and says, simply to be treated as a king. And Alexander says, really? Is that all? And Porus says, yes, sir, that's all. There's no more to be said. And Alexander was so impressed, he gave the man back his kingdom. So think of the picture. A defeated king comes to the conqueror and asks simply to be treated as a king. The creator of the universe is here this morning. He is not defeated. He is victorious over all of the forces of hell and of darkness. And he comes here as victor, and you are the one who's defeated. And it's not you asking him. He is asking you. not to treat his son as a king. That'll come later. He's only asking you to treat his son as a friend and trust him. Could he ask any less? Just trust my son to be your savior and you'll not perish and you'll have everlasting life. You know, sometimes people, and I'm indebted to R.C. Sproul for this insight, sometimes people complain that there's only one way of salvation. Why didn't God provide a whole smorgasbord of ways of salvation? Really? Let's suppose there's a God who created the universe by the genius of his mind. Heaven stretched out full of stars and suns and moons and galaxies. As the crowning



act of his creation, every creature is created. He makes man in his image. And God sets man as the king of creation and puts all things in his hand and says to him, you can do anything, you can go anywhere, you can eat everything, there's only one fruit of one tree that is forbidden on pain of death, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And let's suppose 15 minutes after God created man, man goes to that tree and eats that fruit. and immediately dies in his soul and begins to die in his body. And God casts him out of the garden. And let's suppose as God casts him out of the garden, God gives him a promise that one day a great savior will come who will crush the devil and undo what the devil had done. Let's say that promise grows and expands, so God takes Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, saves him, and gives him a promise. He'll become a great nation as one of Adam's newborn children. And Abraham comes forth and becomes a great nation under God. And let's say Abraham and the nation of Israel rebel against God and end up in slavery. And God again comes to them in Egypt and rescues them from Egypt and brings them out of Egypt by a strong and mighty hand. And yet still Israel grumble and complain and rebel against God and give themselves over into all kinds of idolatry. And God sends prophets after them, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, the whole list of the prophets. And some they kill, others they imprison. And others they exile, cast out. And finally God says, I will send my son. Surely they will not reject my son. And he sends his son down into this world. And Israel and Rome conspire together. And they butcher him on a Roman gibbet outside Jerusalem on a rubbish heap where felons die. And in the very act of their climactic act of hatred, God takes all of their sin and gives it all to his son. And then God says, if you will but trust Him, I will save you. That's the gospel. And Sproul says the wonder is not that there's only one way, but that there's even one way for sinners like you and me to be saved at such a cost to God. who loves the worst, gives the most, and asks the least. Maybe you're here this morning and you've never, ever put your trust in Jesus. Come today and trust Him. And though your sins are red like scarlet, they'll be as white as snow. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for Jesus and your amazing love for us. Draw near, our Father, And stir up, some for the first time and some for the thousandth time, a fresh trust in Jesus as the great example of your love for us. And let us never doubt again that there's a God in heaven who loves sinners on earth and a great cause to himself. In Jesus' name, amen.