

John 3:13–17

Introduction

Last week we saw a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, coming to Jesus by night. Nicodemus said to Jesus:

- John 3:2 — “Rabbi, **we know** that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

Nicodemus saw the signs Jesus was doing in Jerusalem and he “believed in Jesus’ name” (cf. Jn. 2:23-25). And yet Jesus responds to Nicodemus’ “knowing” and “believing” by challenging the nature of his believing – by challenging even what he knows.

- John 3:3 — Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.

If there was one thing in all the world that Nicodemus was sure of, it was that he would one day enter into the life of the age to come (the kingdom of God). But Jesus says that the quality of that life belonging to the age to come is of such a wholly different character from the life associated with this age that in order to enter that life one must quite literally be *born into it*. This Nicodemus can’t accept. So, he knows, and yet he doesn’t know. What he “knows” is not “true” knowledge at all because he’s still only “of the flesh” – because he hasn’t been “born of the Spirit.” How can he *believe*, or *understand*, or *speak truly* of the things of God and of eternal life unless he himself has been born into that life? Nicodemus can’t accept this testimony of Jesus. So Jesus said to Him:

- John 3:10–12 — “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 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?”

On the one hand, Jesus includes with His own “knowing” the “knowing” of His disciples as those who have been born of the Spirit and who have “seen” the kingdom. And yet even this “true” knowing of the disciples is wholly dependent upon that most “true” and most ultimate and absolute knowledge that only Jesus can have of heavenly things. Any true witness and testimony borne by the disciples is still wholly dependent upon the witness and testimony that Jesus bears. So immediately after the “we” and “our” Jesus says to Nicodemus:

I. John 3:13 — *No one* has ascended into heaven *except* he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

“No one has ascended into heaven.” That would have been easy for Nicodemus to agree with. When Jesus says, “*no one* has ascended into heaven,” the implication is that no one *can* or ever *will* ascend into heaven. But why are we talking about this? What’s the point? In order to answer that question, we have to understand what Jesus means by “ascending into heaven.” Is this an

ascending into heaven in order to gain a firsthand knowledge of heavenly things? If so, then the point of saying “no one has ever ascended into heaven” would be to say, “no man can ‘know’ as Jesus knows. But in light of what Jesus says next, that’s probably not the point at all.

“No one has ascended into heaven [or can or will ascend into heaven] *except* he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.” On the one hand, the fact that Jesus—the Son of Man—has descended from out of heaven reveals His firsthand knowledge of *heavenly things* (cf. 3:12). It’s because the Son of Man has descended from out of heaven that He *knows* as no other can ever know and that Nicodemus therefore *ought* to receive His testimony—and that *we ought* to receive His testimony—because no one else has ever descended from out of heaven. And yet it’s also the Son of Man’s descent from heaven that explains how He can be the lone exception to the “rule” that no one has ever *ascended*—or can or will ascend—into heaven. Are you beginning to see, now, what this ascending is about? It’s not about gaining a first-hand knowledge of heavenly things. If that was the case, then the whole point of ascending would be to descend back to earth with that first-hand knowledge to testify and bear witness (cf. 2 Cor. 12:2-4). But here in our passage, the point of ascending is not to descend again. The point is not to gain heavenly knowledge, but a triumphant ascending in power and glory. It’s true that Elijah was taken up into heaven by a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:9-12) and Paul was caught up into paradise where he heard things that man may not utter (2 Cor. 12:2-4), but neither Elijah nor Paul ever “ascended into heaven” in that ultimate sense of ascending up to the throne of God to sit down with Him on His throne (cf. Rev. 22:1-3). The descent from heaven reveals Jesus’ knowledge of heavenly things on the one hand, and on the other hand it prepares the way for and even makes possible His triumphant ascent *as the Son of Man*, in power and glory to where He was before – an ascent wholly impossible for any other man. It’s against this backdrop of a triumphant ascent up to the throne of God that we hear what Jesus says in the next verse.

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

What is this being “lifted up”? In the Old Testament this word very often refers to God being *exalted* over all.

- Psalm 57:5 (cf. 18:46; 21:13) — Be exalted [be lifted up], O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!
- Psalm 46:10 (cf. 148:13) — Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted [lifted up] among the nations, I will be exalted [lifted up] in the earth!

Outside of John’s Gospel, this word appears sixteen times in the New Testament and always means to be exalted. Peter uses this word to describe Jesus’ being lifted up at the right hand of God.

- Acts 2:33 (cf. 5:31) — Being therefore exalted [lifted up] at the right hand of God... he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

But here in John’s Gospel, Jesus uses this word four times and always with a sort of double meaning. “*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted*

up...” In the book of Numbers, when the people of Israel grumbled against the Lord, the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people. When the people confessed their sin and asked Moses to pray to the Lord to take away the serpents, God said to Moses:

- Numbers 21:8–9 — “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.

How was this bronze serpent “lifted up”? It wasn’t exalted to heaven but only lifted up on a pole. And so in a similar way, Jesus—the Son of Man—will be “lifted up” – on a wooden pole; on a Roman cross. But is this all that Jesus means by “lifted up”?—“Lifted up” on a cross? That’s not possible! Jesus sees His being lifted up on the cross in suffering and humiliation as the beginning of His triumphant ascent *as the Son of Man*, in power and glory back into heaven to where He was before.

III. John 3:15 — And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **that everyone who believes [who looks to Him] may *in him* have eternal life.**

The Israelite could look at a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole and be healed from his snake bite, but we cannot have eternal life simply by looking to a corpse hanging on a cross. We cannot have eternal life “*in Him*” who was “lifted up” only on a cross to suffer and die. Jesus sees His being lifted up on the cross in suffering and humiliation as the beginning of His triumphant ascent *as the Son of Man*, in power and glory back into heaven to where He was before — so that now all who believe (who “see” him and look to Him as the *crucified, buried, resurrected, ascended, and enthroned* Son of Man) may *in Him* (cf. Jn. 1:4) have eternal life (be born of the Spirit into that life that belongs to the age to come).

To this point, Jesus has been speaking to Nicodemus. In verse sixteen, it appears that we leave the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, and now it’s the Apostle John himself who reflects on Jesus’ words (cf. Carson; Morris).

IV. John 3:16a — For in this way¹ God loved the world: he even² gave his only Son...

The King James translation of John 3:16 has become sort of “sacred,” you might say. So a few of the newer translations, if at all possible, still try to stay with some of the older wording—especially, “For God *so* loved the world.” The original meaning of the King James may have been: “For God loved the world *so*; “so” meaning, “like so” / “in the following way”; “*This is how* God loved the world.” That’s the actual meaning of the Greek word. But when we hear, “For God *so* loved the world” we automatically think like this: “God loved the world *so much* that he gave his one and only son” (NCV). The danger, here, is that we can tend to *subordinate*

¹ For this straightforward meaning of *houtos* see all of the Greek dictionaries and lexicons as well as the HCSB, NET, and NLT renderings of John 3:16.

² *Hoste* is a marker of either purpose or result and appears only here in John’s gospel. Combined with *houtos* it emphasizes the awesomeness of this **display** of God’s love and so also (indirectly) the infinite greatness of God’s love in and of itself. “Even” is my attempt at reflecting the meaning of *hoste* in this unique context where it follows *houtos*. This is a sort of compromise between the HCSB, NET, and NLT (“For in this way God loved the world: He gave...”) and the “so” of the KJV, ESV, NASB, NIV, etc. (leaving the *houtos* untranslated).

God's sovereignty to His love so that God is ultimately "controlled" by His love – His love being essentially nothing more than a "feeling" He has, or an "emotion." And so what we end up doing is "humanizing" and "domesticating" God. It's a subtle thing, but in practical, real life, we do this so easily. For God *so* loved the world—for God loved the world *so much*—that He was overwhelmingly *compelled* by that *feeling* of love to give to the world His only Son.

I'm not denying that God's love is described in anthropopathic terms of feelings and emotions—I rejoice in this!—but God's love is also described in terms of His sovereign will and choice.

- Deuteronomy 7:7 (cf. 4:37) — It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD **set** his love on you and **chose** you...
- Deuteronomy 10:15 — The LORD **set** his heart in love on your fathers and **chose** their offspring after them, you above all peoples...
- Romans 9:10–13 (cf. Mal. 1:2-5; Jer. 31:3; Rom. 11:28) — When Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls— she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I **loved**, but Esau I **hated**."

This sovereign, electing love isn't something cold and heartless. It's the love of a personal God full of infinite compassion, and tenderness, and warmth (cf. Hos. 11:8-9; Isa. 49:15-16). And yet it is still a sovereign love. When we say, "For God *so* loved the world that He gave His only Son," we can tend to make the "*feeling*" or the *emotional* depth of God's love the determiner of what He does. When we say (more accurately), "For *in this way* God loved the world: He even gave His only Son," we're able to see God's love in true and right relationship with His sovereignty. We're able to see both the infinite tenderness and the absolute sovereignty of God's love.

So what is the "world" that *God* has loved in this way? At one level, the answer is simple: It's this lost, ruined, sinful "world of mankind." But after that, it's not really so simple as we might think. Is this a reference to God's love for every single, individual human being who's ever lived or is this a reference to the "world of mankind" in some other sense? In order to answer that question, we have to look ahead to verse seventeen.

V. John 3:17 — For God did not send his Son into the world in order that he might condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

What we have here is the Greek word, *hina* ("in order that"), used with a verb in the subjunctive mood – the mood of potentiality. The question is, what kind of "potentiality" is this? Are we to understand, "in order that something *may possibly* happen or not happen"? Or are we to understand, "in order that something *should most certainly* happen or not happen"? Is this potentiality completely uncertain, or is this a potentiality that's ultimately certain?

The ESV (along with the NASB, NRSV, & KJV) translates the first and second halves of this verse in a way that could imply different kinds of potentiality. "For God did not send his Son into the world **to** condemn the world." That's *hina* with a subjunctive verb: "In order that he might

condemn the world”). Now we know that if God had sent his Son into the world with the mission of condemning the world He would certainly have accomplished this mission successfully. Do you see how this is a potentiality that’s certain? But now watch how the second half of the verse is translated, even though the Greek (*hina* with the subjunctive) is identical. “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.” Should we think of this second potentiality as any less certain than the first? Should we think that the **condemnation** in the first half would have been a divine *command* that the Son was to *certainly accomplish*, whereas the **salvation** in the second half is only a divine *wish* that the Son is to *make possible*? The parallelism in this verse requires that the kind of potentiality be the same in both halves (cf. NIV; HCSB; NCV; NLT). It’s wrong to say that a hypothetical purpose of condemnation would have been more certain than God’s real purpose of salvation. If God sends His Son into the world in order that **the world** might be saved through Him, then **THE WORLD** *will* be saved through Him.³

Whenever it comes to *God’s* saving work and purpose, *hina* with the subjunctive (in order that something might happen) *always* expresses the certainty of accomplishment.⁴ We see this, for example, in verse sixteen (see also v. 15): “For in this way God loved the world: He even gave his only Son, in order that everyone who believes in him[—*may possibly* not perish?—]*might* [*certainly*] not perish but [*might certainly*] have eternal life.” Consider these other examples from John’s Gospel:

- John 10:10 — I came **in order that** [the sheep] may have life and have it abundantly [may possibly?].
- John 10:17 — I lay down my life **in order that** I may take it up again [may possibly?].
- John 11:52 — He prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also **in order that** He might gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad [might possibly?].
- John 14:3 — I will come again and will take you to myself, **in order that** where I am you may be also [may possibly?].
- John 14:16 — I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, **in order that** He might be with you forever [might possibly?].
- John 17:19 — For their sake I consecrate myself, **in order that** they also may be sanctified in truth [may possibly?].

There are many Christians who would paraphrase John 3:17 like this: “God did not send His Son into the world because He purposed that *the world* should certainly be condemned, but because He wished that *the world* might possibly be saved through Him.” But this is to take the saving love of God and make it great in terms of feelings and wishes, but wholly powerless in terms of

³ “Through him” is the subordinate adverbial clause (also placed at the end of the sentence in the Greek) and related to the *hina* only via the verb, *sozo*. The emphasis is on the **salvation** that is in and through Jesus. God’s purpose in sending Jesus into the world is to accomplish through Him the **salvation of the world**. Even if we were to read the verse with this emphasis, “in order that through **Him** the world might be saved,” we still see that the actual salvation of the world is essential to the purpose expressed via the *hina* with the subjunctive.

⁴ See Mat. 9:6; Lk. 9:45; 11:49–51; 22:28–30; Jn. 1:6–7; 5:22–23; 9:3, 39; 11:4, 11; 12:46; 13:19; 14:13; 5:2, 11; 17:1–2; Rom. 3:19; 5:20; 6:4, 6; 9:22–23; 11:31–32; 1 Cor. 1:28; 11:32; 2 Cor. 1:9; 5:14–15, 21; 8:9; 12:7; Gal. 1:15–16; 3:13–14, 22; 4:4–5; Eph. 2:4–7, 10, 14–16; 4:10; 5:25–27; Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Thess. 5:9–10; 2 Thess. 2:11–12; Titus 2:13–14; Heb. 2:14, 17; 10:9; 13:12; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18; 2 Pet. 1:3–4; 1 Jn. 3:5, 8; 4:9

purpose and will. This is to take the saving love of God and equate it wholly with His “feelings” and “wishes” while divorcing it completely from His sovereign will and power. When John says that God did not send His Son into the world *in order that* he might condemn the world, **but in order that** the world might be **saved** through Him, the point is that Jesus *will* successfully accomplish this mission that He was given – the salvation of *the world*. And so what we see now is not only the tenderness of God’s love, but the power of God’s love; not only the warmth and sincerity of God’s love, but the sovereignty of God’s love. In this way, we see that God’s love is not mere sentimentality, but truly “saving.” In short: If God sent His Son into the world to save the world, then the world will indeed be saved. Jesus says in chapter twelve:

➤ John 12:47 — I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.

In other words, the Father did not send Jesus into the world to accomplish the mission of condemning the world, but to accomplish the mission of saving the world. Saving *what* world? The same lost, and ruined, and sinful world that He loved (“For in this way God loved the world”).

But is this, then, universalism? Is the Bible teaching that every single, individual human being who’s ever lived will be saved? Not at all! Now we have to go back to verse sixteen:

VI. John 3:16b — For in this way God loved the world: He even gave his only Son, **in order that everyone⁵ who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.**

If you grew up reading or memorizing the King James, you remember the famous “whosoever” here (“that whosoever believes in Him”). I think this is another mistake in translation that most of the newer translations have fixed. “Whoever” so emphasizes the individual that we’re not able to see him in the context of the whole “world” that’s being saved. The Greek word is *pas*, and two hundred and fifty times (in the ESV) it’s translated “**every** / **everywhere** / **everything** / **everyone**.” Only fifteen times is it translated “whoever” or “whatever” and in almost all these cases it could just as legitimately be translated, “every.” Can you see the difference between “**whoever**” and “**everyone**”? So we read in Romans chapter ten:

➤ Romans 10:11–13 — For the Scripture says, “**Everyone⁶** who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of **all**, bestowing his riches on **all** those⁷ who call on him. For “**everyone⁸** who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

The emphasis in these verses isn’t on the individual by himself (“whoever”), but on the individual as part of a collective whole (“everyone”). And so it is, also, in John 3:16: “For in this way God loved the world: He even gave his only Son, in order that **everyone** who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life” (cf. NRSV; HCSB; NET; YLT; NLT; contra NASB;

⁵ *Pas* with a singular article functioning substantively.

⁶ *Pas* with a singular article functioning substantively.

⁷ *Pas* with a plural article functioning substantively.

⁸ *Pas* with a singular relative pronoun.

ESV; NIV). Who are the ones who will be saved?—Who have eternal life? “*Everyone* who believes in Jesus.” And it’s in the saving of *this* “everyone” that we see the saving of the world.

VII. John 3:16–17 — For in this way God loved the world [of sinful man **generally**]: He even gave his only Son, in order that everyone who believes in him [in order that every one of *those* people **particularly**] might not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world in order that he might condemn the world, but in order that the world [of mankind] might [most certainly] be saved through him.

This salvation of the world is the certain result of the powerful, sovereign love of God that He manifested in sending His only Son. “For in this way God loved the world: He even gave his only Son... **IN ORDER THAT** [*that*] world might be saved through Him.” In this salvation of the world, what we’re meant to think of is a whole new creation — a whole new humanity. Paul writes of the “new man” in Colossians chapter three:

- Colossians 3:9–10 — You have put off the old man with its practices and have put on the new man, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

And then in Galatians, Paul writes of the new humanity that’s made up of Jews and Gentiles without distinction:

- Galatians 6:15 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17) — For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation [a new humanity].

God has purposed the redemption of the entire creation. He takes the old and makes it new – a redeemed world made up of Jews and Gentiles alike. This “new creation” *is* the world saved. This “new humanity” *is* the world saved. Not the whole world in terms of a *general* universalism (everyone who’s ever lived), but rather the whole world in terms of a *particular* universalism. It’s in this particular “everyone who believes” that we see fulfilled the universal scope of God’s sovereign, saving love.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we rejoice to know that God’s redeeming love is not expressed as a sentimental wish – in mere potentialities that are always uncertain and questionable. God’s redeeming love is itself a sovereign love that “*wills*” because it’s the *love* of a sovereign God. Therefore, God’s redeeming love is a sovereign love that’s *expressed* and *demonstrated* in sovereign, saving power – a power that can never be conquered or overcome. If God sent His Son into the world *in order to* save the world, then nothing can be more certain than that the world will indeed be saved. And so we ought to give God all the glory for the great things He has done, and is doing, and will do!

This sovereign love isn’t something cold or heartless. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is the love of the one we now call our Father, full of infinite compassion and warmth and tender affection. Let us, then—as we look to Jesus “lifted up” as the crucified, buried,

resurrected, ascended, and enthroned Son of Man—let us then rest ourselves safe and secure in *this* love.

- John 3:16–17 — For in this way God loved the world: He even gave his only Son, **in order that** everyone who believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world **in order that** he might condemn the world, but **in order that** the world might be saved through him.