

John 3:13-18

Introduction

Ultimately, the theme of Christmas, the theme of Easter, the theme of every Sunday that we gather together as a church, and the theme of all true Christianity is the glory of God revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's the theme of the Scriptures from page one all the way to the end. And so on this Resurrection Sunday, as always, our desire—our longing—is to see this glory of God revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This morning, I pray that we'll all be able to say with the Apostle Paul:

- Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

John 3:16 begins with these words:

I. John 3:16a — For in this way God loved the world:

It's easy for us to take perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible for granted, isn't it? We've heard it so many times that we say to ourselves, "Of course God loved the world." "Of course He did. God *is* love." Do we ever take it for granted that *God* loved the *world*? In the context of John's Gospel, perhaps nothing more unlikely or even apparently impossible could ever be said.

What is the world? The first reference to the world is in chapter one, verses 9-10.

- John 1:9-10 — The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.

How could the world be made through Him—through Jesus, the eternal Word and Son of God made flesh—and yet not know Him? What kind of blindness is this? Later on, in chapter seven, Jesus says:

- John 7:7 — The world... hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil.

So the world's blindness is a deliberate blindness. It's not an "innocent" blindness; it's a moral kind of blindness that takes the form of enmity and hatred toward the true Jesus as He is made known to us in the pages of Scripture – from Genesis to Revelation. The blindness of the world is a stubborn, willful blindness that grows up out of the fact that its works are evil. This is the testimony of Jesus about the world – the very world to which we all belonged. To be human means that we are all—or were all at one time—"card-carrying" members in good standing of "the world" (cf. Jn. 17:6; Eph. 2:1-3). Therefore, we all hated the Jesus who testifies about us that our works are evil. We all loved the darkness rather than the light – because our works were evil (cf. 3:19). If we were *of* the world, then how could our works be anything other? The Apostle Paul writes:

- Titus 1:15 — To the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.

And the Bible says in another place:

- Romans 14:23 (cf. Mat. 7:17) — Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

“The world... hates me,” Jesus said, “because I testify about it that its works are evil.” And now we come back to these amazing words: “For in this way God loved the world.” There was *nothing* in the world to call forth this love from God. Instead, there was only everything in this world—and in us—that a holy God hated and abhorred. God is love, the Bible says (1 Jn. 4:8, 16), but this doesn’t mean that God was obligated to love the world. God did not have to love the world to be “true to Himself.” If God had left the world to perish in its sin, He would have been wholly true and faithful to Himself – to His own nature and character. Here, then, is the first wonder of the Gospel: Though there was nothing in God to “obligate” this love, and though there was nothing in the world to call forth this love, the God who is love sovereignly set His LOVE upon *the world*. And this brings us to the second wonder of the Gospel:

II. John 3:16b — *For in this way* God loved the world: *He even gave his only Son...*

We see first, in these words, the incomprehensible greatness of God’s love. “Gave,” here, has the idea of “gave up”; “God even *gave up for the world* his only Son.” This is the Son of whom we learn in chapter one that He is from all eternity “in the bosom of the Father” (1:18). Here is a kind of intimacy and mutual knowing that’s beyond our ability to conceive. Here is a fellowship of love and infinite delight for which we have not even the faintest parallel anywhere in our experience. And yet **God loved the world in this way**: “He even gave His only Son.” What *wondrous* love is this?

If we see in these words first of all the incomprehensible greatness of God’s sovereign love, we see also in these words the holiness of God’s love. The love of God—though it is full of the most tender affection—is not sentimentality. God’s love for the world is not a love that overlooks the world’s evil, accepting the world for what it is, but rather a love that in its very expression powerfully *effects* and *accomplishes* the saving of the world. That’s why we read in the very next verse—in verse seventeen:

- 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.

Saved from what? The “salvation” is set in contrast with “condemnation.” To condemn is to pronounce someone “guilty.” It’s a legal judgment and ruling that has nothing to do with what the defendant thinks or feels but only with the facts of the case as those facts are infallibly and comprehensively known by God the righteous Judge. Though Jesus testified of the world that its works are evil, and though the world hates Jesus, yet God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world—to declare and execute a guilty verdict, but to save the world—to rescue the world from this guilty verdict and from the sentence of condemnation that it brings. And what is that sentence of condemnation that accompanies God’s righteous verdict of “guilty”?

III. John 3:16c — 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**...

“Perish” is one of those words in John 3:16 that we can tend to miss. When we think about people “perishing” it might be most natural for us to feel pity and compassion. We think of the news story in which someone has tragically “perished” in an accident. We think of the innocent sufferer that no one knew about or who couldn’t be rescued in time. That’s not what this perishing is. This perishing is the execution of God’s just sentence of condemnation. It’s not like the case of someone tragically perishing in an accident, but of a man justly on death row who perishes for his crimes.

➤ Romans 6:23 — The wages of sin [the Bible says] is death...

Though God is absolutely impartial, He is not a neutral or disinterested Judge. He is not only the Judge but the Law-Giver, and the laws that He gives are never arbitrary; they flow necessarily from His own essential nature and character – from His own holiness. Therefore, to break the law that God gives—to fail to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves—is an offense against God’s own person – an assault (if there can be such a thing) upon not only His sovereign rule, but upon His holiness, upon the one who *is* “Holy, Holy, Holy.” It is *this* holy God and Law-Giver who is *also* the righteous Judge. Who is it that loved the world? It is God, the righteous Judge, whose holiness demands that the world perish for its crimes. This is the God who loved the world.

We’ve seen in the first place that this “perishing” is the execution of God’s just sentence of condemnation. But now we need to see in the second place that this perishing isn’t just the loss of physical existence, or even the annihilation of our souls so that we no longer exist in any sense of the word. The perishing in John 3:16 is a reference to conscious, eternal punishment in hell. As you tremble and shrink back at those words, so do I. Can’t we just talk this morning about the love of God? Isn’t that what John 3:16 is about? We cannot know the love of God that surpasses knowledge unless we see the holiness of that love. Jesus said in Matthew chapter five:

➤ Matthew 5:29–30 — If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that one of your members **perish** than that your whole body be thrown into **hell**. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that one of your members **perish** than that your whole body go into **hell**.

In another place, Jesus speaks of the final judgment and says of those on His left:

➤ Matthew 25:46 — These will go away into **eternal punishment**...

Jesus says in Matthew 13:

➤ Matthew 13:41–43 — The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the **fiery furnace**. **In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

In other places we hear of those “thrown into the outer darkness” (Mat. 8:11-12), of those undergoing a “punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 6-7), and of those whose “portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur” (Rev. 21:8). The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Thessalonians chapter one:

- 2 Thessalonians 1:9 — They [who do not know God and do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ] will suffer the **punishment of eternal ruin, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.**

If this is what the perishing in John 3:16 is, then it’s especially now that we have to remember that this perishing is also the execution of God’s *righteous sentence* of condemnation. If the punishment is just, then what should this tell us about the crime? If the punishment is eternal, then what should this tell us about the ultimate, intransigent evil and wickedness of our hearts? Hell isn’t just a place of eternal punishment, it’s a place where the true depravity of our hearts (which in this life is still restrained and counteracted by many things) is finally fully discovered and revealed (cf. Rev. 9:20; 16:9, 11). If our hearts revolt at the thought of eternal punishment, do they revolt even more at the thought of the true nature of our sin and the true depravity of our hearts—that we should have justly earned and merited this sentence of condemnation?

Who is it that loved the world? It is God, the righteous Law-Giver and Judge, whose holiness demands that the world perish for its crimes against His holy law – even against His own holy Person. This is the God who loved the world. How can this be? God is not “Jekyll and Hyde.” He’s not holy one minute and then no longer holy, but loving. God takes no delight in the death of the wicked; on the other hand, God does have a holy delight in the revelation of His perfect and infinite justice. God is never at war within Himself, wanting to love, but unfortunately obligated to be just. Therefore, even God’s love must be a holy love. How, then, can God look upon this world that has refused to “know” Him and whose works are evil — and set His own infinite, tender love upon that world? How can He look upon this world whose crimes are of such a nature that they demand the just sentence of eternal punishment — and love that world? It was three verses earlier, in verse 13, that Jesus said this to Nicodemus:

IV. John 3:13 — *No one* has ascended into heaven [or *can* ever ascend into heaven] *except* he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

The descent of God’s only Son from out of heaven is what explains how He can be the lone exception to the “rule” that no one has ever *ascended* into heaven. This “ascending into heaven” is an ascending up to the place where God dwells—even to the throne of God—and receiving from Him all authority in heaven and on earth (Mat. 28:18) – “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him” (Dan. 7:14). The descent of God’s only Son from out of heaven is what makes possible His triumphant ascent, now *as the Son of Man*, in power and glory to where He was before – an ascent 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 next in verse fourteen.

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

In the Old Testament this word for “lifted up” very often refers to God being exalted over all (cf. Ps. 46:10; 148:13). Everywhere else in the New Testament, this word means to be exalted or made great. But how is the Son of Man “lifted up” here in John chapter three? “*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, [Jesus says,] 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 the bronze serpent “lifted up”? It wasn’t exalted to heaven but only lifted up on a pole. And so Jesus, the Son of Man, will also be “lifted up”—and hung on a wooden pole; on a Roman cross. “For in this way God loved the world: He even gave His only Son...”

In the Old Testament law, we read these words:

- Deuteronomy 21:22–23 — If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God.

So what does it mean when Jesus—God’s only Son who descended from out of heaven—is now “*lifted up*” and hung on a tree? The prophet Isaiah wrote to God’s people who were trusting in His promise of a coming redeemer:

- Isaiah 53:4–6 — Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The Apostle Peter explains, writing to those who believe:

- 1 Peter 2:24 — He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

In being “*lifted up*”—and hung on a Roman cross, Paul says:

- Galatians 3:13 — Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

And so for all those who look to Him “lifted up” on the cross, who receive and rest upon Him alone for their salvation, the justice of God the righteous Judge has been satisfied. Our sins are no longer imputed or reckoned to our account.

- Psalm 32:1–2 — [How] blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. [How] blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.

But is this all that Jesus means by “lifted up”?—“Lifted up” on a cross?

VI. 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 can’t have eternal life simply by looking to a corpse hanging on a cross. We can’t 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 in power and glory—*now* as the *Son of Man*—back into heaven to where He was before. Therefore, when Jesus says that the Son of Man *must* be “lifted up” He means that He must be lifted up *via* the cross even to the power and glory of an indestructible resurrection life at the right hand of God (cf. Heb. 7:16). In the very first sermon ever preached after the resurrection, the Apostle Peter proclaims:

- Acts 2:31–36 (cf. Acts 5:30–31) — [David] foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted [lifted up] at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

The Apostle Paul speaks of the power that God worked in Christ when...

- Ephesians 1:20–23 — ...he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

And so, now, for all those who look to Jesus “lifted up” via the cross to resurrection glory at the right hand of God, who receive and rest upon Him alone for their salvation, the justice of God the holy Law-Giver and righteous Judge is satisfied. Our sins are no longer imputed or reckoned to our account, but only the perfect obedience and righteousness of Christ.

- Romans 4:25 — [He] was delivered up for our trespasses, [Paul says,] and raised for our justification [“so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”; 2 Cor. 5:21].

And so in this way, even in the *salvation* of the *world*—of every guilty sinner who believes in Jesus—the holiness and the justice of God is put on full display – as is also, in infinite, glorious measure, the love of God that will eternally surpass all our comprehension.

VII. John 3:16d — 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*.

What is this eternal life? It's the life that belongs to the age to come. It's that abundant life of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 10:10; Rom. 14:17) that we who have believed in Jesus have already in the present and that will one day be revealed in us, in all of its fullness, in the eternal ages to come.

- Ephesians 2:4–7 — But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, **made us alive** together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that **in the coming ages** he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Have your eyes been opened to see the glory of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ? It's in light of this glory of God revealed in the Gospel that we can understand the words of John 3:18:

VIII. John 3:18 — The one who believes in him [in Jesus] is not condemned, but the one who does not believe is condemned already [the sentence of condemnation is already at work], because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

Have you believed in the name of the only Son of God? Have you received, and are you resting upon Him alone for your salvation? Are you able to say with the Apostle Paul this morning:

- Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.