

God So Loved

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Reading from John chapter 3 verses 14 - 17;

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

German Reformation theologian Martin Luther called these verses *“The gospel in miniature.”*¹

Verse 16 is one of the most memorized and quoted verses in the entire Bible.

So eloquently phrased, few verses capture our need for salvation and the love of God and the means of our salvation provided so perfectly.

Like all things we become too familiar with, it's power and beauty can be lost.

Perhaps by discovering the context we can recapture the depth and beauty of what has been written here.

For those of you hearing these verses for the first time, I hope their truth will reach your heart and bring you to a place of trust in Christ.

Starting at verse 14 we read, *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”*

How many of you are familiar with the story of Moses making a bronze snake and lifting it up in the desert?

The story is found in Numbers 21. The people of Israel were speaking against God and Moses. Venomous snakes started biting the Israelites and many started to die.

So they recognized their mistake and asked for forgiveness. God instructed Moses to make a bronze snake, put it on a pole, and anyone who looked at it became immune to the poison and lived.

Keep in mind, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus in these verses. Remember a few weeks ago we looked at Jesus and Nicodemus?

Here we pick up the end of their conversation.

Nicodemus is a well studied religious teacher of Israel and therefore is very familiar with the story of Moses and the snakes in the book of Numbers.

Knowing Nicodemus will understand the parallels, he says the Son of Man will be lifted up in the same way providing salvation for all who look to him.

¹ Interpreters Bible Commentary pg510.

Son of Man is the title of the Messiah that will one day save Israel. Jesus is setting the scene so Nicodemus will recognize it is Jesus that will be lifted up as the Saviour.

Nicodemus would have understood the implications - the Israelites were unable to save themselves, there was no antidote for the poison and it was killing them, all they needed to do was look to the snake and they would be saved.

Verses 14 and 15 set the context for God's saving action and the message is very clear - we are unable to save ourselves, there is no antidote for sin and it is killing us, all we need to do is to look to Jesus who is lifted up for all to be saved.

It would become clear to Nicodemus, that as healing came to the snake bitten Israelites by looking up at the bronze serpent hanging from a pole, so life is given to those who look up with the eyes of faith at the Son of Man hanging on the cross.²

Then there is a transition into the famous John 3:16. Here the conversation with Nicodemus fades out of the picture, and what we are reading are the meditations of John the writer, who is contemplating the mystery of grace.

The mystery of the nature of salvation sweeps over John and his eyes are opened to the incredible grace displayed in the ministry of Jesus, by which law and judgement have been superseded by gospel and forgiveness.³

Reading from verse 16, *"For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*

This is what God has done for us - why? Love!

Remember the time and culture in which John is writing. The Hellenistic, Greek, Gnostic culture John is juxtaposing the Christian God to.

Do you recall our first message in this series, John 1:1, 'In the beginning was the Word.... Etc.'

Remember who the Logos was to Hellenistic and Gnostic culture? An impersonal spiritual force far removed from creation - which would never have any contact with the physical world as anything physical was seen as evil, corrupt, impure.

Yet in John's Gospel the Logos is not far removed but is directly responsible for our creation, and not only comes and walks among us, takes on our form, but sacrifices himself to save us because..... wait for it..... God loves us!

This would have been mind blowing for those he was writing to!

What? God loves us?

² Wilbert Howard, Interpreters Bible Commentary pg.508.

³ Ibid. pg.509.

In Greek culture humanity was the muse of the Gods, toys to be played with and discarded, fates to be tossed about.

In Gnostic culture our very humanity was something to escape, to get rid of, because our very being was detestable to God, impure.

Christianity blew their minds! God love us - even sacrifices Himself for us!

God is desperate to connect to us!

As Wilbert Howard points out, *"The gift of eternal life originates in the love of God."* (IBC. Pg.509)

God loved the world so much - so much!

So much God took extreme measures to save us - gave his one and only Son.

The Greek for one and only is monogene, μονογενε, mono meaning one, and gene from which we get gene, genetics. Other places in the Bible it says we are adopted, we become the children of God, but never is that word monogene used for us.

God reveals Himself in terms we can understand - giving his one and only Son in sacrifice for us.

God is love, is complete in love, is a trinity, relational, and so saves us by sacrificing a part of Himself.

Some see the Christian God as sadistic, sacrificing his son for us, yet that perspective completely missed the point that God is sacrificing Himself for us.

As the Apostle Paul recognized this and writes in 2 Corinthians, that *"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself"*. (2Cor.5:19 NKJV)

God reaches out because of love.

We are loved.

That word for love means to take great pleasure in, to long for.

God takes great pleasure in us - GREAT pleasure.

Imagine, God, the creator of the universe, derives extreme pleasure from us.

God longs for us.

God is deeply passionate.

So many times our culture pictures God as a far off stoic judgemental supreme being using fear to motivate people into obedience.

That's not it at all.

God loved the world so much he gave up what was dear to Him, even part of Him - a desperate act of passion to save us, to bring us back into the life we were created for.

All of that so we would not perish - to perish, is to be entirely cut off. It is permanent and absolute destruction.

To incur the loss of true or eternal life is to be delivered up to eternal misery.⁴

Merrill Tenney in the Expositor's Commentary points out, *"To perish does not mean to cease to exist; it means to experience utter failure, futility, and loss of all that makes existence worth while.*

Eternal life, on the other hand, is not just duration, but quality. It introduces a totally new quality of life." (pg.50)

This is the new kind of life John is saying Jesus offers us.

God comes to save, to reconcile, to provide a way back into a life we were originally designed to live.

God comes, not to judge, not to condemn, not to point out all our faults - but do demonstrate the depths of his love for you and me.

An invitation to dance with Him for eternity, to partake in the peace, the joy, the life of God.

To be embraced by God.

I love the emphasis in verse 17 where it says, *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*

How many times have we run into religious people who declare God loves you, but you leave feeling condemned?

How many times have we walked out of church feeling condemned instead of embraced by God's love?

If God did not send his Son into the world to condemn us, what makes us think we have the right to condemn each other?

To condemn, to judge, to decide penalty on another - this is not what Jesus came to do.

Again Merrill Tenney points out, *"God is not seeking an excuse to condemn, but endeavouring to save."* (Expositor's pg.50)

Do we have the attitude of Christ or do we have the attitude of Satan?

The attitude of Christ does not look for things to accuse others of - doesn't go around pointing out the faults of other - but endeavours to save.

That word Satan means the accuser - one who seeks to condemn.

It's not about whether or not there is justification for condemnation, it's about how we approach each other.

Yes, we are all guilty, yes we have all pulled away, yes, we can find lots to condemn in each other - but God approaches us in love to reconnect, Satan approaches to instill guilt and shame.

How do we approach each other?

Do we instill guilt and shame in others or do we approach others in love that leads them to freedom?

⁴ Thayer's Greek Lexicon - Perish

Freedom from condemnation and an invitation to become what we were meant to be - in fellowship with God where there is no more condemnation.

That is why Paul writes in Romans 8:1, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."*

What kind of God is this that does such a thing?

Christianity is so different, so odd, so..... unexpected!

The Jewish people didn't recognize their Son of Man, their Messiah.

They didn't recognize he came to save not only the Jewish people but the world.

"For God so loved the kosmos!" The world, not just Israel, but the entire world!

They were thinking of a powerful rebellion to overthrow Rome. A leader of strength, a conqueror.

Little did they realize, they as us needed to be saved from themselves.

God had much deeper plans of salvation, a plan that would reach down into the very depths of our souls.

A plan that would demonstrate just how deeply and passionately we are loved.

God sees us and his heart breaks.

It breaks because of the deep love he has towards us - deeper than we can image.

"How do I show them just how much I long for them! How do I turn them back to me that they would be saved?"

"I know, I will make the greatest sacrifice they have ever seen! I myself will send my Son, my very being, as a sacrifice for them! If they see how I'm willing to sacrifice so much, they will see how much I truly love them and therefore trust in me!"

So God demonstrates His love for us, sends his Son, a very part of Him, submits to death on a cross and shows us God is worthy to be trusted.

The Apostle Paul saw the depth of love in this. While writing his letter to the Romans he says, *"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Rom.5:6-8)

God's love for you, for me, demonstrated on a cross.

Christianity says; 'There is nothing God wouldn't do to be with you, to save you, to get you to come back into the divine dance of life and joy with Him!'

I like how Arthur Gossip captures this mystery of Christianity in the Interpreters Commentary. He says: *"Is it not a strange thing that it is the voice of a crucified man dying in agony that has convinced innumerable hearts that God is love?"*

We can rudely shake off the warning hand of the God, we can harden our faces to receive the thunderbolts of punishment of the almighty without flinching;

But what are we to do with this strange Son of God who dies for us, meeting the hugeness of our undeserving with a love still huger?

It is desperately difficult to hold out against one who lays such a desperate claim for our hearts.”
(pg.508)

“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

“The gift of eternal life originates in the love of God. Its possession depends upon the faith of the recipient.”⁵

How do we partake of this gift? How do we receive it? How do we experience it?

Is this all just philosophical musings or is it something we are to experience?

The story of Jesus and the disciples are invitational. Christianity is not a spectator sport.

We are invited, called, and intended to participate, to partake, to experience all of these things that are written.

This is offered to whoever believes in Jesus - those who believe will experience this life.

What do you mean ‘believes in’?

John uses an interesting construct of the Greek word for faith, *pistis*.

To believe in is to have a faith directed unto someone, in faith to give oneself up to Jesus. To commit oneself trustfully.⁶

Our salvation, our freedom from ourselves, the emancipation from sin comes from trusting in Jesus with our deepest longings.

To believe in Jesus is not about believing if He existed - it’s about intimate trust.

The words faith, trust and believe in are all interchangeable - they mean the same thing - it’s about trusting Jesus with our deepest desires and longings.

We’ve talked extensively about this over the past few years.

Faith is essential to salvation - as the other writers in the New Testament affirm, *“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”* (Paul, Eph.2:8)

There it is again - gift of God received by faith - this is the foundation of Christian teaching!

Why Faith? Why Trust?

⁵ Interpreters Bible Commentary, pg.509.

⁶ Thayer’s Greek Lexicon.

Because this is the center of every human being which determines every thought, every motivation and every act and word we speak.

Change what we believe in and everything else changes.

This is how we are all wired - every single one of us.

For us to change we must deal with things much deeper than what's on the surface.

Jesus forever was explaining this to those around him.

The religious laws, the ceremonies, the good behaviour principles - were all superficial - they never dealt with the cause of our behaviour, the very cause of our motivations, even our thoughts.

The problem with humanity goes much deeper than our outward behaviour, much deeper than our thoughts, even deeper than our internal motivations - all of those stem from where we place our trust.

Arthur Gossip in the Interpreters Bible Commentary captures it well; *"You must begin farther back than with palpable, overt things like good deeds - you must get behind even your thoughts and motives - you must start with your beliefs."*

"For our beliefs colour everything and determine what our motives and thoughts and words and deeds will be." (pg.511)

To believe in Jesus is to commit trustfully to him our deepest desires, our dignity, our very being - trusting Jesus knows them, trusting God is greater, provides more love, more life, more joy than the greatest joy we have set our heart on here in this life.

That is belief - intimate trust.

If we can place such trust in Jesus, we will experience the life John and the other gospel writers, and the New Testament writers keep talking about.

One day the Holy Spirit revealed to me something I had set my heart on that was not God.

It was a good thing, something many of us experience and are experiencing - a tangible joy of life.

That day in prayer, the Holy Spirit spoke to me and said, "You don't believe I can fulfill you more than that."

God was revealing something in me - a misplaced belief which was hindering me from experiencing the full life God intended for me.

When the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to this, it took me three months before I would choose to trust in Jesus, believe God would fulfill me more than this pleasure.

Yet when I did, I was ushered into a new state of being - it was exactly as the writers in the Bible and throughout church history describe - my very motives, thoughts and desires changed.

The joy was so powerful, on the fourth day I couldn't take it any more and I prayed, "God, you're too good, you have to stop, I can't handle your joy and goodness - people are going to think I'm mad!"

And from then it slowly started to fade away - but it left such a deep impression on my soul it resonates every time I see it in the Bible and read of it in the commentaries or in the histories of Christians throughout the ages.

This is very real.

It's for everyone.

God's love for us made a way. God's love displayed for all to see. God's deep longing for you and I is available for all who will believe in, trust in him.

Whoever believes will not perish, will not be cut off from, but have this eternal life.

I conclude with this quote from Arthur Gossip, *"And if you will see Jesus, and keep looking at Jesus, the heavenly things will draw upon you, and the glory of what God really is will come home to you;*

And the splendor of what a human life can be will storm your hearts, and bring you to your feet, whole, ready to live a fuller life than you have ever dreamed is possible." (IBC pg.509)

Amen.