



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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What God Has Done
John 3:14-21

We know it well—almost too well!

Most of us could probably recite the central verse in this passage we just read together—John 3:16. In fact, it was probably one of the first Bible verses many of us memorized as children. Let's say it together again, from the beloved King James Version translation of it . . .

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

It's a message we know well, but one we need to hear again and need to declare to those who haven't heard it—or haven't *really* heard it.

Sometimes I think a pastor friend was right when he said it seems like so many people in our churches have heard enough about the love of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ that they've become inoculated against it! But if we'll hear it, the message comes through loud and clear: *God gave His only begotten Son so that whoever trusts in Him might have eternal life.*

Preachers and teachers have taken many approaches to this golden text through the years, focusing sometimes on God's love, or on His gift of His Son, or on the word "whosoever" or "whoever."

This morning, I want us to focus on it in its context, taking a look at the "big picture."

Jesus and Nicodemus

These verses we're looking at this morning come at the end of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus came offering words of praise and admiration to Jesus: "**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**" (3:2).¹

Jesus responded to him by saying, "**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God**" (3:3). Nicodemus couldn't fathom that, thinking that Jesus was talking about physical birth. In the conversation that followed, Jesus showed Nicodemus how He was talking about a spiritual birth from above.

Now it's not clear exactly where the conversation transitions to commentary. In Greek, there are no quotation marks as we have them in English. Sometimes certain words are used as markers that a quotation is beginning, but it's not always clear where it ends.

So modern English translations of this passage put the quotation marks at different points. For instance, the 2011 New International Version and the Revised Standard Version end the quotation of Jesus' words at the end of verse 15, viewing verses 16-21 as John's commentary on

what Jesus said. But most other translations (such as the 1984 New International Version, New American Standard Bible, English Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, Christian Standard Bible, and Revised English Bible) view verses 16-21 as part of what Jesus said, as does the New King James Version, which I read this text from this morning. The King James Version doesn't use quotation marks at all, so it's as ambiguous as the Greek text is.

Whether Jesus said it directly or it was John's commentary on what Jesus had just said in the conversation, this passage contains one of the most beautiful statements of *what God has done* that can be found anywhere! It's the Spirit-inspired testimony to God's boundless love displayed in His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

It roots the gospel of Jesus Christ firmly in the Old Testament Scriptures, tells what He's done in Christ, and how a person's response to what He's done in Christ determines his or her standing before God.

Moses and the serpent

In verses 14-15, Jesus tells Nicodemus:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Jesus was referring here to the story from our Scripture Lesson today from Numbers 21:4-9. The people of Israel were becoming impatient in their wilderness wanderings, and began to grumble against God and Moses, complaining about *everything*, including God's provision for them. The LORD's response to this rebellion was to send fiery serpents among the people—apparently snakes with a venom that burned as it poisoned. The people then confessed their sin and asked Moses to intercede for them. When he did, the LORD instructed him to make a bronze serpent and put it on a standard or a pole in the camp. Whoever was bitten could look at the snake on the pole and live.

Jesus was using that incident to foreshadow what would happen through Him. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man (this seemed to be Jesus' favorite title for Himself) must be lifted up. And just as those who looked on the serpent lived, those who will look to Jesus in faith will have *eternal life*!

For God so loved the world . . .

The Son of Man would be lifted up so **that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life**. That's the Son's role.

But is this Jesus trying to appease God the Father?

Not at all! Because in that verse that we treasure so much (3:16), we're told that **God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son** so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. The Son didn't simply decide to come on His own; the Father *gave* Him.

The word that's translated **so** in most versions is often taken to mean that God loved the world *so much* that He did this. A few versions even translate it that way. But the word actually means “in this way.” So an even clearer translation might be that **God loved the world in such a way that He gave His only begotten Son . . .**² It's really talking about the *quality* of God's love more than the *quantity*—*how* He loves more than *how much*.

The way that He loved resulted in *action*—He sent His only begotten Son, His unique Son, the one who is related to Him as no other, because this only begotten Son is an eternal and co-

equal member of the Godhead, the Holy Trinity. And He sent Him for a very specific purpose—to give eternal life to everyone who would put their faith in Him. This word that’s usually translated *believe* is not just about believing the facts about Him. It’s about having faith in Him, trusting Him. Because we believe the facts about Him, we put our trust in Him, taking Him at His word that He will do what He promises, that He will give us eternal life!

Verse 17 elaborates on the purpose of God’s gift: **“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”** The purpose of His coming was not *condemnation* but *salvation*.

Think about that. *God’s love moved Him to give the ultimate gift He could give—His only begotten Son—to save us!* Paul described it this way in Romans 5:8—**But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** That’s an incredible love, isn’t it?

There’s an old gospel hymn that captures it well. A preacher named Frederick M. Lehman wrote it in 1917 and titled it “The Love of God.” In a pamphlet Lehman wrote in 1948 about the history of the song, he said that fifty years earlier, he had heard an evangelist at a camp meeting quote the words that form the last stanza and had written them down. They had been found written in pencil on the wall of a room in a mental institution. While it was originally assumed that the patient who had died in that room had written this poem in a moment of sanity, the words were actually based on the Jewish poem *Haddamut*. Meir Ben Isaac Nehorai, a Jewish cantor in Worms, Germany had written it in Aramaic in 1050. Years later Lehman wrote the first two stanzas of the hymn and the chorus. The first stanza goes like this:

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 guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
And pardoned from his sin.

And the last stanza, found on the asylum wall:

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
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.³

And yet, not everyone will respond to that love.

Jesus said that those who believe in Him would have eternal life. But this text also tells us that though the Son didn’t come to judge or condemn the world, those who do not believe are *already* condemned because they have not believed in the only begotten Son—the one God sent so that they might have eternal life if they believe in Him!

So it's a self-imposed judgment! God has provided the way, but they have refused it. As the text puts it:

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil”
(3:19).

As the text goes on to say, those who do evil hate the light and won't come to the light so that their wicked works won't be exposed. But those who practice the truth come to the light so that it can be shown that the good deeds they've done had been done in God (3:20-21).

I think Frederick Buechner, an American author and preacher, has captured it well when he wrote

If there is a terror about darkness because we cannot see, there is also a terror about light because we can see. There is a terror about light because much of what we see in the light about ourselves and our world we would rather not see, would rather not have been seen.⁴

And so . . .

God gave His only begotten Son so that whoever trusts in Him might have eternal life. And our response of belief or unbelief already determines whether we're under condemnation.

If we believe in Christ in the sense of putting our faith in Him, we are saved. We receive eternal life, the life of the ages, which we already begin to experience now in Christ and will experience in its fullness in eternity.

That sort of makes unbelief like refusing to receive treatment for a curable terminal disease, doesn't it?

God has loved us in such a way that He sent His only Son to save us! So how do we receive this salvation?

It's simply through trusting Jesus—giving ourselves up to Him, depending on Him to set us right with God.

It's not just believing the facts, but really *trusting Him*. It's the difference between believing a plane will fly and actually getting on it and trusting it to take you to your destination!

Have *you* trusted Him? Will you?

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture taken from the the New King James Version.

² My translation.

³ http://tanbible.com/tol_sng/sng_theloveofgod.htm, accessed 3/9/2015; also <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/l/o/loveofgo.htm>, accessed 3/9/2015.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (HarperOne, 1985), 50. Cited at <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/may/7051208.html> (accessed 03/08/2018).