

GOSPEL OF JOHN: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

“God So Loved”

John 3:13-17

Open your Bibles to John Chapter 3. We are going to look at verses 13-17. Let's read our text and then get into our study. John, the apostle Jesus loved, writes:

¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

We left off last time with the “**teacher of Israel**,” Nicodemus, being given a Bible lesson by a Carpenter from Galilee. Of course, this Carpenter also happened to be God come in the flesh. Nicodemus, a Pharisee who also happened to be a member of the Sanhedrin, came one night looking to find out just who this Jesus was. He had caused quite a stir in Jerusalem that Passover, having overturned the tables of the money changers at the Temple. He was also gathering quite the following, because He was doing many miracles. So Nicodemus may have been thinking, “*Is He the One, the Messiah we have been looking for?*” The answer to this question was, “Yes and No.”

Jesus was the Messiah, but He was far from the One the Jewish leaders were seeking. They were looking for a Conquering King to restore the kingdom of Israel. But Jesus came as a Suffering Servant to give them a new heart.

Israel did not need to be saved from the world. The world needed to be saved from the power of sin and death.

So Jesus takes this learned man through the pages of the Old Testament, showing him that God was going to make a New Covenant.

This promise does include a new kingdom that will one day come. But it will not just be filled with Jews. It will be filled with people whose spirit has been restored by the Holy Spirit, who will then live inside them. We call this being born again or born from above.

Nicodemus, however, just didn't get it. His thinking was still earthbound and in need of reformation. So Jesus takes him all the way back to the Book of Numbers to show him

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what he really needs. Let's look at verse 13 in John and then we'll look at this Old Testament passage Jesus was teaching Nicodemus from.

No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, *that is*, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

Jesus had just told Nicodemus that his theology was earthbound. Although the new birth was clearly taught in Ezekiel, Nicodemus remained clueless as the Lord tried to explain it to him. If he couldn't understand what Jesus was teaching him about earthly things, he would never be able to understand the heavenly things. He needed to trust in what Jesus was telling him.

Why?

Because Jesus is the only person to ever “**come down from heaven**” where this knowledge Nicodemus needed came from. This quote from Gene Pensiero's commentary on John helps us understand what Jesus is talking about:

The Judaism of Jesus' day circulated many stories of bygone saints who had ascended into Heaven and received special insight into God's ways and plans. Jesus insists that no-one has ascended to Heaven in such a way as to return to talk about heavenly things. Jesus can speak of heavenly things, not because He ascended to Heaven from a home on earth and then descended to tell others of His experiences, but because Heaven was His home in the first place. He is the zoon who came from Heaven.

No other religion or religious figure has a claim to special revelation. Only Jesus. This is a powerful proof text for the deity of Jesus Christ.

Humans are NOT pre-existent, but Jesus is. Jesus existed prior to being conceived. He was from eternity past and will be there in eternity future. He was and is and is to come. Jesus was the God/Man who came down from Heaven and would one day ascend back there. But first He had some work to do. Look at verse 14:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

Turn to Numbers 21 and we'll see what Jesus is trying to show Nicodemus. Beginning at verse 4 Moses writes:

⁴Then they (Israel in the wilderness) journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of

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Egypt to die in the wilderness? For *there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.*” ⁶So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

⁷Therefore 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.

⁸Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

The Book of Numbers is set between the second and 40th years of the wandering of the Israelites in the desert. It records a lot of grumbling and complaining by the Jews about their circumstances. Here in chapter 21 they complained so loudly against the Lord and Moses that God had had enough. So He sent “**fiery serpents**” amongst the people, and many died from their venom. It didn’t take long for the people to realize their error and repent. They went to Moses and asked him to intercede on their behalf, which he did. He went to the throne of grace and asks God for mercy. But the solution that the Lord gives him seems a little odd at first glance.

He has Moses fashion a bronze serpent, put it on a pole, and then lift it up for the people to see. Those who had been bitten, when they looked up at the pole, were healed. There are many odd incidents in the Old Testament that the Lord used to illustrate what would be New Testament truths. He did this to help us grasp difficult concepts. In 1 Corinthians 10:11 Paul wrote this:

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

One of the most important of these “**examples**” is when the Lord told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham obeyed; but then while he was in the act, God stopped him.

Why is this important?

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Because later we discover that the site of this almost-sacrifice is exactly where Jesus would be crucified. God the Father did not spare His only begotten Son. What Abraham did was a type.

That is exactly what we have here in Numbers 21 and John 3. Jesus points back to the serpent on the pole as having two components:

- 1) First, to be saved and given physical life, all Israel had to do was look at the serpent. It was an act of grace on God's part.
- 2) Second, the serpent must be lifted up so all could see.

But here is the important thing to understand in this illustration:

The people didn't have to do anything but trust God that if they looked at the pole, they would be saved. The pole didn't heal them. They weren't required to make sacrifice or do penance. All they had to do was believe and receive.

Sound familiar?

That is the crux of the Gospel message.

But why the serpent, of all things?

And why make it out of brass?

Brass is the metal of judgment.

And I believe that the serpent represents the fall of man — the thing we deserve judgment for. Man was deceived by the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

So this is the picture God gave us by having Moses fashion this object:

Jesus absorbed our sin when He was lifted up on the Cross. His sacrifice made our salvation possible. Here in John 3 He is telling Nicodemus to look to Him, and he will be born again. It is so simple, yet so complex. That is why it takes faith. We can only be saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2). Back to our text. Let's read verses 14 and 15 together to get some context:

¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

So why was must the Son of Man be lifted up?

Because, like the people of Israel in the desert, man has been poisoned by sin.

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Man is not in need of a worldly political leader or great religious man. That is what the Antichrist and False Prophet will be. Man is in desperate need of a Savior. Jesus is that Savior, and we need to look to Him alone for everlasting life:

On January 6, 1850, a snowstorm almost crippled the city of Colchester, England; and a teenage boy was unable to get to the church he usually attended. So he made his way to a nearby Primitive Methodist chapel, where an ill-prepared layman was substituting for the absent preacher.

His text was Isaiah 45:22—“Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.” For many months this young teenager had been miserable and under deep conviction; but though he had been reared in church (both his father and grandfather were preachers), he did not have the assurance of salvation.

The unprepared substitute minister did not have much to say, so he kept repeating the text. “A man need not go to college to learn to look,” he shouted. “Anyone can look—a child can look!” About that time, he saw the visitor sitting to one side, and he pointed at him and said, “Young man, you look very miserable. Young man, look to Jesus Christ!”

The young man did look by faith, and that was how the great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon was converted. (From The Bible Exposition Commentary).

The difference between perishing and living, between condemnation and salvation, is faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing else and no one else can get you there.

Jesus could have come into the world as a judge and destroyed every rebellious sinner. But that will happen later.

He first came into the world to save it — to seek and save the lost. And the coolest thing about this is that it was God’s plan all along. Look at verse 16:

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.

These are the most important 25 words ever penned. They have led multitudes of people to seek the One who can save them.

In fact, there was a preacher that D. L. Moody met in England named Henry Moorehouse. He introduced himself by saying, “I will preach for you in America.” Moody invited him to Chicago to do just that.

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Months later Moorehouse sent a telegram to let him know he was there. So Moody allowed him to preach while he was away. When he came home, he asked his wife how the young preacher did.

She said, *“Oh, he is a better preacher than you are. He is telling sinners that God loves them.”* *“That is not right,”* Moody said. *“God does not love sinners.”* *“Well,”* she replied, *“you go and hear him. He has been preaching all week and he has only had one verse for a text.”*

Guess what that verse was?

John 3:16.

Moody went and heard Moorehouse preach, and it was on that night that he first clearly understood the Gospel and God’s great love. From that point on Moody taught a different and much more powerful Gospel.

According to “pulpit lore,” every sermon Moorehouse ever preached was from John 3:16. He did not, however, give the people old manna by recycling the same sermon. Each one was different. Such is the awesome message in these 25 words.

I am not going to teach from this verse for the rest of my life. But I do want to take a deep dive into it during this study. So let’s pick it apart little by little.

First, we need to know who came up with this idea to send Jesus. John writes:

For God

John used the Greek word *“Theos”* here. It is the same word that Matthew used in his Gospel speaking of Jesus as **“Emmanuel,”** which means *“God (Theos) with us”* (Matthew 1:23). He also used it in Matthew 3:16 when he said the **“Spirit of God”** descended like a dove lighting on Jesus.

I believe what John is trying to convey here is that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all had a part in this gracious act (as we shall see). God the Father, the Creator of the universe, made the plan. God the Son carried it out. And He did so in the power of God the Holy Spirit.

And this God desires to have a relationship with us, His creation. He doesn’t need it because He already has a perfect love relationship in the Godhead. He desires it. Look at the next few words:

so loved

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This word “**love**” is not what we typically think of as love. The English language only has one word to convey this idea. I love hot dogs, and I also love Julie. In Greek there are at least four words to communicate love.

- There is *phileo*, or brotherly love, which we have for our friends.
- There is *storge* love, which we have for our families.
- There is *eros* love, which is supposed to be something we have for our spouse, but the world has perverted it. That is a study for another time.
- Here we have *agape* love. I like to think of it as God’s love. A form of this word is used in John 15:13 where Jesus says this:

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.

The website *Got Questions* does a good job of conveying the idea of agape love, saying this:

The type of love that characterizes God is not a sappy, sentimental feeling such as we often hear portrayed. God loves because that is His nature and the expression of His being. He loves the unlovable and the unlovely, not because we deserve to be loved or because of any excellence we possess, but because it is His nature to love and He must be true to His nature.

God **so** loves us anyway. The word “**so**” speaks of the greatness and intensity of this love for us. We don’t have to clean up our act or start doing better to come to Him. We can come to Him just as we are — then HE will transform us.

He cannot love us any more, and He will not love us any less.

What we are talking about here is pure, spiritual love. It is a love that desires to give. And this love is best conveyed at the Cross. This is why:

For God so loved the world

Here is the part that Moody and so many others miss. God so loved **the world**. He doesn’t just love the Jews or the elect. He loves you.

This word for “**world**” is “*kosmos*” in the original language, and John uses it some 78 times in his Gospel and 24 times in his letters. It can refer to the world system organized in antagonism to God. But most often it refers to the realm where human beings live and the people who live in it. In other words, the plain meaning of this word *kosmos* is any one, any where, any time.

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Some would disagree with me saying this. They limit the word to those God chose in eternity past that He foreknew He would save. John's use of this word, however, does not suggest in any way that God's love was or is limited. In fact, his use of the word elsewhere speaks of the opposite. In 1 John 2:2 John says, this speaking of what Jesus did on the Cross:

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

Then in John 12:32 John quotes Jesus as saying this:

And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to Myself."

What does "all" mean?

ALL.

And just in case you might think that only John had this idea, listen to what Paul has to say about Jesus (1 Timothy 4:10b):

we trust in the living God, who is *the* Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.

Jesus' death was sufficient for the whole world. In the end not everyone will get saved, but everyone can. That is why John wrote this:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son,

"Begotten" Son could also be translated "*unique.*"

John spent the first two chapters of his Gospel telling us that Jesus is uniquely God incarnate. He is God in human flesh, fully God and fully man. He was always God but added humanity to His deity to be the one and only God-Man. As a man, He could step in as a substitute for the death we all deserve as wages for our sin. As God His sacrifice was perfect, satisfying the Father's holiness. Because of what Jesus did, the Father can declare as "*righteous*" everyone who believes in His Son. Thus John continues by saying:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him

This part of the verse points to the recipient of God's love. **God so loves the world**, but the world does not receive or benefit from that love until it believes in Jesus. Once one does that, they receive the wonderful gift that the Father gave.

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Believes in means more than just an intellectual awareness or agreement. It means to trust in, to rely on, and to cling to. And don't miss this — it is the important part: It is available to whoever **believes**. Like those we read about in Numbers, all you have to do is **believe** and **receive**. If you do, this last part belongs to you:

should not perish but have everlasting life.

This is what God intended all along. His desire is that none should perish, and all would come to repentance.

God's love actually saves man from eternal destruction. He looks on fallen humanity; does not want it to perish; and so, in His love, He extends the free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. Those who accept that grace gift receive eternal life in the presence of God. We get to be with Him forever. More about this in a moment.

I know that this is somewhat coincidental, but did you notice that the word “**Son**” is right in the middle of this verse?

There are 12 words before and 12 after.

Jon Courson, in his commentary on John's Gospel, says this about this coincidence:

It is no coincidence, however, that those who have experienced God's presence most powerfully are those who have made the Son the center of their lives. Just as Jesus is the center of the greatest verse in all Scripture, He must be central in our hearts and lives if they are to have meaning, purpose, and impact (Ephesians 1:10). This means that any person, pursuit, or passion in my life that cannot be centered on Jesus Christ has no place in my life.

And that brings us to our final verse for the day (verse 17). John writes this:

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

In this study session we learned all about those who will not perish. Next time we are going to learn about those who will.

Jesus did not come the first time to condemn the world. He came to save it.

But one day, very soon I think, He is going to return in power and great glory. At that time, every knee will bow and tongue will confess that He is Lord. Even those who dwell upon the Earth. For them it will be too late.

Their eternity will be much different. Instead of being in the presence of their loving Creator, they will be separated from Him for eternity. They will be thrown into a place

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called the Lake of Fire. Jesus said that it is a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. If that doesn't give you a burden for the lost, I don't know what will.

I am going to pass out a sheet of paper with John 3:16 on it, but you will notice I left out three words. Let's read the verse out loud and place our name in the blank spots.

For God so loved Frank that He gave His only begotten Son, that (if) Frank believes in Him Frank should not perish but have everlasting life.

Isn't that music to your ears?

Now take that sheet and share it with someone who needs to put their name there.

Let's pray.

SING THE REVELATION SONG