

## John 3:11-21 – God So Loved the World

Last week we spoke about Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Jesus said that Nicodemus could not rely on his first birth into the nation of Israel but must be born again from the Spirit. Jesus knew what was in humanity, and the Old Covenant birth was not able to save a person from their sinful nature. To see the eternal kingdom, one must have an eternal birth, given desires for God's eternal kingdom.

Here we see the rest of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, including what might be the most famous verse in the whole Bible. There is some discussion as to whether all of verse 11 to 21 is the same monologue of Jesus, or if from verse 16 on is an explanation by John to what Jesus meant. As Greek didn't have quotation marks at this time, readers are reliant on the context to direct to when someone was speaking. In the end it doesn't really matter, all words of Scripture are Jesus' words.

Personally, I find it most likely that it is all one speech to Nicodemus, as verse 16 and on make more sense in the context of the whole conversation. Even if this means that Jesus was speaking in a way that Nicodemus couldn't understand. Jesus does this all the time!

Let's look at John 3:11-21:

Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup>I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup>No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup>Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. <sup>19</sup>This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

It is not surprising that John 3:16, a verse famous for its words on God's love, is picked out by many as a summary of the gospel. A friend of mine asked me if I was going to put on a

wig and hold up a sign when preaching on this. It makes us feel good that God loves us. This verse tells us about how much he loves us by giving us his Son. What is required of us in this verse is minimal, belief, and the reward is great, eternal life. The gospel in a nutshell.

### **Slide 7**

Now, we should say, it's not that any of that is wrong, it's just not the whole story. There is a strong of change in tone between this verse and the rest of John's gospel. Not only the rest of John's gospel, but the rest of John's letters, and his book of Revelation. The starkest contrast is in the way John here speaks of the "world." Elsewhere, the "world" is not seen as an object of loveliness, but a place that rejects Jesus. It is a place where God's wrath lays, not his love.

A lot of our misunderstanding comes from our use of the word 'so' in this verse, as in, "God so loved the world." Some, mistranslate this to say, "God loved the world so much..."<sup>1</sup> The problem here is that it ignores the way John speaks about the world everywhere else, and it places our value at the forefront rather than God's gift of Christ. It would be better to render it, "For this is how God loved the world, he gave his one and only Son." Here the emphasis is put on God's gift, not us.

### **Slide 8**

One commentator puts it very starkly, "it is much more often the case that the Father loves the Son (3:35; 10:17; 15:9–10; 17:23–24, 26; using another verb, 5:20), the Son loves the Father (14:31); Jesus loves his own, his true disciples (11:5; 13:1, 33, 34; 14:21; 15:9–10, 12; 21:7, 20), and they must love him (14:15, 21, 23f., 28; 21:15–25). They must also love one another (13:34–35; 15:12–13, 17; 17:26). Sometimes John speaks of the, but more frequently the Father's love for the disciples is mediated through his Son. The world, fallen and rebellious human beings in general, does not and cannot love God (3:19; 5:42; 8:42)."<sup>2</sup> So, when we look at John 3:16, it begs the question, in what sense here is God loving the "world."

### **Slide 9**

Whatever Jesus means by saying "God so loved the world," it doesn't mean that God loved the world because of its loveliness. John makes this clear in 1Jn.2:15-17, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. <sup>16</sup> For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes

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<sup>1</sup> This is how Eugene Peterson translates the Greek *houtos* in "The Message," it is a poor translation, but serves his theological purpose.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, [\*The Gospel according to John\*](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 204.

not from the Father but from the world. <sup>17</sup>The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” Remember, being born again, gives us desires for eternal things, not worldly ones.

### **Slide 10**

Once Christians have been born again, they are removed from the “world,” as we see in John 15:18-19, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. <sup>19</sup>If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” God stands in radical opposition to the ways of the world but comes to the world to take his own out of the world. This is the mission of the Son to the world, the reason for his incarnation, to come to the world and rescue his own.

The word ‘world’ is being used in two senses, one, those in rebellion against God, and two, as a synonym for the Nations, the various peoples of the world.

### **Slide 11**

Remember, Jesus is saying this to Nicodemus, “the teacher of Israel,” the one who he said needs to be born again to. The reason Jesus says that God loved the *world* is to make sure that we, along with Nicodemus, know that God’s purposes in sending Jesus is to open salvation to all the nations. This is Jesus’ mission, to save the *world* from their sin, i.e. not just the Jewish people.

If you know your Old Testament, God had been promising to do this from the beginning. He even says to Abraham, that all peoples will be blessed through him (Gen.12:1-3). Israel was always meant to be a light to the nations, even if their primary purpose was creating a place for the Messiah to come. Now, in the coming of Jesus, this too is fulfilled.

It is in this sense that God loves the world. It does not mean that his stance towards the world has changed, or he flip-flops from verse to verse in the Bible. However, God chooses to form believers out of the world, to call them into new life, to be born again into the new eternal world. This is the world that is not condemned by God but transformed by his love. Those who do not believe still stand condemned, as is made clear in verse 18.

### **Slide 12**

This leads us to our next question, in what sense does our belief save us? Why is it that “whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life?” When Jesus first talks about belief to Nicodemus, he confusingly mentions the Bronze Serpent in the wilderness. Jesus says, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Now, I don't blame most people for skimming over this aspect, as the story of the snakes in the wilderness is a bit of an odd one, especially if you're unfamiliar with the way symbolism works in the Bible. So, how on earth does Moses' snake on a pole foreshadow Jesus?

In Numbers 21:4-9 we see the Israelites wandering in the wilderness after the Exodus, "growing impatient" and grumbling against God for bringing them there in the first place. In response to this grumbling, God sends poisonous snakes among them and many of them died. When Israel repents of their grumbling, God gives them an antidote to the snakebites. The antidote is to look upon a bronze serpent that is on a pole fashioned by Moses.

### **Slide 13-14**

Now, of course, this story is pretty weird! Now, this isn't the first, second, or third time they were caught grumbling in the desert, it's a bit of a reoccurring theme. The Israelites grumbling in the desert isn't like a child whining about being uncomfortable, it is a serious problem as it shows a lack of faith in the God that saved them from Egypt. The serpents God sends are a symbol of Egypt. Egyptian leaders would often use the serpent as a symbol of their crafty power, most easily seen on Pharaoh's crown and headdress. As Israel is complaining to God for bringing them out of Egypt, so he sends a bit of Egypt to them to remind them about what he saved them from.

### **Slide 15**

More than this, the serpents in the wilderness also remind us of the one who tricks Eve into taking the fruit, causing death and sin to come into the world. For Israel to grumble at God's salvation, seen in being taken out of Egypt and brought into the promised land, they are ultimately saying they prefer eternal death to being saved, going back to Egypt. To grumble about God's salvation is the opposite of what God desires, he saves us to glorify him, to put our faith in him.

The story of Moses' staff with the snake shows the centrality of belief, of faith. We might think, why is there such a high consequence if we don't believe? In not believing in God, we are separating ourselves from the true source of life, and putting confidence in that which kills us. For the Israelites in the wilderness, their grumbling in the desert showed their lack of faith in God. God reminded them of what the serpent does, what sin does, it kills like a serpent. It is only by having faith in God that his people could be freed from their sin, this faith is seen in their action of looking upon the bronze serpent, the symbol of our sin on a pole.

### **Slide 16**

Just as the Israelites were saved from snakebites by looking at a bronze snake on a pole, so all who believe are saved from their judgement by looking upon Jesus on the Cross. What better picture of our sin is there than Jesus, the Son of God who loved us so much that he died for us, hanging on a cross for the ones who put him there? The Israelites had to recognize what they were being saved from, their sin, by seeing an image of their sin on a pole, whether that be the desire to go back to Egypt, or a sign of their original sin in the garden. So we too see Jesus lifted up, a sign of our sin, and a sign of his love.

The point to Jesus looking back to the story of the bronze serpent is to show how God's people can come to receive eternal life. Because it is all on him, not our loveliness, but his grace, we can only come to receive his grace by faith alone, the opposite of grumbling against his salvation.

### **Slide 17**

There is a question as to what this eternal life is? Is it merely life that never ends? How does belief in God attach us to this eternal life?

Jesus defines what he means by "eternal life" in John 17:3 as he prays to the Father, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." To know God is not merely to have information about him, even if that is essential, but to be in an intimate relationship with him. Remember 'knowing' is idiomatic in Hebrew for the kind of relationship a husband and wife have. This is a relationship that is defined by love. God so loved, his love comes first.

Love and faith are intimately connected. So are faith and knowledge. Faith might be defined by true knowledge of God combined with our love for him; assurance that he loves us, and gave himself for us. This is what is given to us in our being born again, as we discussed last week, reordered desires for eternal things, and nothing is more eternal than God's love.

### **Slide 18**

Eternal life is most properly the life that God has in himself as the only true eternal God. John says in one of his letters that our knowing God through Jesus unites us to his eternal life (1Jn.5:20). In our love for God, we participate in the eternal life that is proper to him alone. It is in this way that eternal life also is a quality of life that we have today. Even though we might have it in part now, it will be given in full in the age to come.

### **Slide 19**

Remember, John also says that "God is love," he says it twice in 1Jn.4 (v.8 and 16). It is because of his love, that he is love, that we are saved. He first loved us though we were his enemies, not because of our loveliness. It is no surprise then that we are united to God by

loving him. That love is best seen in Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus says in Jn.15:12-13, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

### **Slide 20**

Notice God's love is not passive, he didn't "fall in love" with the world. God shows his love through his self-sacrifice. "God is love," love is natural to God, and seen eternally in the love between the members of the Trinity. But to us, love is a duty, seen in our actions. We are commanded to love God and our neighbour, even our enemies.

We know there is eternal love among the members of the Trinity, but what about love between the members of Trinity, that is, Trinity Christian Reformed Church? His command is to love each other as he loved us, and that is seen in his self-sacrifice. The relationship of our feelings towards someone and our actions towards them are related, but for a Christian, our duty to show love even when we don't feel it should supersede any feelings.

Love is eternal, as Paul says, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1Cor.13:1). Love is a fruit of the Spirit, maybe the central fruit of the Spirit. Paul says, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1Cor.13:13). Faith is fulfilled in sight, when we see God face to face. Hope is fulfilled in everlasting happiness and joy in God's eternal presence. But love, that which unites us to God's eternal life, remains forever. Love is as eternal as the eternal life it connects us to. God is eternal life, God is love.

So how can we, the members of Trinity show God's self-sacrificial love to one another in a time like this? I don't know exactly what that looks like. I do know that God can always surprise us with his grace. Let us not fall into fear and anxiety, but turn to one another and God in love, giving an image of our Lord to one another.