



John 3:9-18

“For God So Loved the World”

9 Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

11 "Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness.

12 "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

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

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

15 "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

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.

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

18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Try to imagine for a moment the shock you might feel if you were a teacher and you suddenly found out that everything you had been teaching for your entire life had been wrong. The way the evolutionary biologist feels five seconds after death.

Well, if you can imagine that you might have a grasp of the way Nicodemus had felt after Jesus had told him that the only way someone could be saved from their sins and enter the Kingdom of God was to be Born Again. You see for all his life, Nicodemus had almost certainly been teaching men that their salvation depended on their being part of the Jewish community and keeping the law. Now Jesus says, that it is not by membership in the covenant, and circumcision and good works that they are saved, but by the Holy Spirit's regenerating them and giving them a new heart.

Nicodemus is dismayed, and he asks Jesus "how can these things" (that is the things that Jesus has been teaching him) "be?" And Jesus replies "***Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?***" He was a teacher of the people of Israel, a Rabbi, what was he supposed to be teaching them from? God's word, the Old Testament. Well, what Jesus had just told him was in the Old Testament as well. We saw last week how that necessary divine Heart Transplant where God takes out the old dead heart of stone and puts in a new living heart of flesh was described in Ezek 36:26. But sadly at this point most of Israel's teachers were in darkness and instead of teaching the Word of God they taught as "doctrines of the commandments of men." They had become as Jesus later warned his disciples "*Blind leaders of the blind.*"

Nicodemus, you remember, had come to Jesus with a cocky, “we” that is he and the other Rabbis “know” who you are. But in fact they didn’t know at all. Jesus knew that Nicodemus had probably come to debate all sorts of fine points about the kingdom of God with Him. But Jesus asks, look if you don’t even believe that it is necessary to be born again in order to be saved, which is the most elementary of doctrines, how will you believe heavenly things? *Many of you may have had the experience of having people want to talk about some detail of the faith, Christian living, marriage and divorce, the resurrection, or the second coming, or heaven, but they don’t even believe they have to be born again and believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved, so they will never believe the witness of scripture regarding other things?*

Then Jesus says, I’m telling you the truth Nicodemus, and I’ll tell you how “we” know. Because “we” that is the Son of Man came down from heaven to tell you. Jesus as the Logos, the Word of God, is God’s revelation, He knows these things for certain because heaven is His home, there are no secrets from Him. There are many men who have come claiming they knew God’s will, that they were able, so to speak to climb up into heaven and converse the Almighty. But Jesus says, no mere man has done that or can do that, but He, the Son of God has come to reveal God’s plan of salvation to all men.

What is that plan of salvation? Well that is what verses 14-18 discuss. The plan of salvation wasn’t simply the incarnation, now that Jesus the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity should come down from heaven, and be born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, and thus become man in addition to being God was a vital part of the plan of redemption. Only Jesus as fully God AND fully Man do that saving work. But that saving work didn’t take place in a barn in Bethlehem, it took place on a Cross at Calvary. I stress that point because around Christmas that tends to be forgotten. Everyone likes to talk about the wise men and the baby Jesus, and sing about “*Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!*” and forget what the true price of that reconciliation was.

Jesus knows what the cost of that reconciliation was to be, and he tells Nicodemus in verse 14. “**As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up**” Jesus there is making reference to an incident in Numbers 21:4-9 where the people of Israel in the desert had bitterly complained to Moses about how unfair their situation was and how it would have been better to stay in Egypt, so God had sent poisonous serpents, that is snakes, into the camp and they had bitten the people and many had died. So the people had repented and begged Moses to intercede with God on their behalf, and the Lord had told him to make a serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole, and lift it up so that when anyone was bitten they could look at that serpent and live. That of course required an act of faith on their part. If they didn’t believe what Moses told them and look to the serpent, they’d die.

Jesus was saying I came to earth to be lifted up on a cross like that serpent, that men might look to me and be saved from the wrath of God. At this point Nicodemus doesn’t understand and doesn’t believe, but later he will see Jesus lifted up and he will believe. This man, so afraid of public opinion that he waited until it was dark to visit Jesus, will later go with Joseph of Arimathea, to Pilate to request that the Crucified and lifeless body of Christ be given to them for burial.

But did it ever occur to you that that’s the HOW of salvation, but not the WHY. Why was God willing to do this for us? Especially because the bible doesn’t say men were his bestest buddies or worthy of salvation. Nope, you look at the bible and it says we are fallen, our hearts are evil, we are rebels, enemies to God. We aren’t worthy of salvation, we are worthy of judgment. But instead of God simply bringing down the gavel and pronouncing the whole lot of us guilty as charged and condemning us to Hell. He sends his one and only begotten Son to die lifted on a cross, to bear our sins, and suffer our punishment.

This is what Isaiah 53 says Jesus came to do:

Is. 53:4 Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.

6 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.

Why would God send his only Son to do that? Fathers, which of you would send your own son to do that for his friends much less His enemies? Why would God the Father do that? One little word, only four letters long in English in verse 16. LOVE. He *so Loved the world*.

"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." Martin Luther rightly called this verse, "The Bible in miniature." As JC Ryle pointed out, Their sins He cannot love--but He loves their souls. So out of this Great Love Jesus is sent. I know we hear verse 16 all the time, and it is usually disconnected from verses 17-18 but they are critical because they eliminate all potential for neutrality. It is not that Jesus came into a world where men stood in a neutral position towards God, neither damned nor saved, in an effort to persuade them to choose to believe in Him instead of choosing to follow the Devil. He came into a world where all men were born fallen and "condemned already" as verse 18 puts it. The only possibility for their salvation was that these fallen men would be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and believe in Him. If that doesn't happen, if they don't believe they are condemned already. The sentence on them of eternal punishment has already been passed, their only hope is Jesus Christ.

We will talk more about this next week, but for now I want to give you two applications from the two parts of verse 18 either side of that semi-colon:

First, "He who believes in Him is not condemned": Have you truly considered the scope of that statement? I think Fanny Crosby summed up very well, "**The vilest offender who truly believes, That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.**" It really is the case that there is no sin so great, that the blood of Christ cannot wash it away. Now most evangelical Christians will say they acknowledge that, without really considering the scope of that. Let me try to illustrate what I mean by the scope with an example from the life of concentration camp survivor and evangelist Corrie Ten Boom:

"It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. ... And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man...

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent. ... "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein, ..." his hand came out, ... "will you forgive me?" And I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and could not. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it — I knew that. ...

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. ... "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. "I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."

The Blood of Christ can forgive any sin, and if we have been forgiven we too must forgive. Have you truly realized both of those things? Remember that you who believe were chosen by God and saved out of the world, and that not because you were better, but only because of His were you too were once part of the rebellious, sinful, perishing mass. Therefore you too, must show Christ's love to a lost and dying world.

Second, "but he who does not believe is condemned already." As someone has said ***Faith in the Lord Jesus is the very key of salvation. He that has it has life, and he that has it not has not life. Nothing whatever beside this faith is necessary to our complete justification; but nothing whatever, except this faith, will give us an interest in Christ.*** IF you will not believe in the Lord Jesus, it is only a matter of time before the sentence that you are under is carried out. So many people consider the merciful call salvation through faith in Christ as a matter of supreme indifference as though the minister was advertising a time share in a place called heaven. Understand that this is not a "Try it, you may like it offer". This is a you are sitting on death row, the clock is ticking and your only hope of pardon lies in Jesus Christ.

God the father has shown his love in His willingness to sacrifice that which was most precious to Him His Son, He has given the ultimate gift.

But are you willing to believe and repent and let go of the sinful life that will be your undoing?

[One night in New York City, at the close of a sermon by Dr. MacArthur, a gentleman came to him and said, "Dr. MacArthur, I want to ask you a question; if I become a Christian must I give up my money?" Dr. MacArthur was a wise man, and answered, "If you become a Christian, and Jesus Christ asks you for your money, you must be willing to give it up, every penny of it." The man said, "Dr. MacArthur, I will take a week to think about that." Dr. MacArthur knew it was no good pressing the man just then, and he said, "Very well." The man came back after a week, and said, "Dr. MacArthur, I have settled it; I will hold on to my money till death, and if Christ and Heaven must go, they must go." That was an awful decision, but it was an intelligent one. Are you ready to say that to-night? "I will hold on to my money till death; I will hold on to godless companions till death; I will hold on to my godless pleasures till death; and if Christ and Heaven must go and peace and joy and hope and manhood and womanhood and God's favour and Christ's acknowledgment and eternal life must go, and eternal ruin come, let them go and let it come." Are you ready to say that, men and women?] – **RA Torrey**