

“The Tragedy of Unbelief”
John 3:18, 36
(Preached at Trinity, January 24, 2018)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. **Verse 22** describes a change in location from Jerusalem to “the land of Judea,” probably referring to the region not far from Jericho. Jesus was spending time with His disciples, who were baptizing. John the Baptist was also continuing to baptize and direct men to Christ.
2. This was creating tension with John's disciples who saw Jesus as a threat to their ministry. John quickly corrected them,
John 3:27-28 NAU - "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven. ²⁸ "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent ahead of Him.'"
3. Then we read John's wonderful words in **Verse 30**.
"He must increase, but I must decrease."
When our eyes are cast upon the infinite greatness of Christ, everything else begins to shrink in significance. This needs to be the grand display of our lives.
Matthew Henry – “The shining forth of the glory of Christ eclipses the lustre of all other glory. The glory that stands in *competition* with Christ, that of the world and the flesh, decreases and loses ground in the soul as the knowledge and love of Christ increase and get ground.” ¹
4. In **Verse 31** John describes this great Christ who eclipses everything else.
Jesus is the one who has come from above and is above all.
He existed before anything was. He is the author of creation.
The Shorter Catechism (Spurgeon's Catechism):
Q. What is God?
A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.
This applies to Christ!
5. The question before all humanity is will we have Him? Will we bow before Him? Will we trust Him?
The great theme of **Chapter 3** is the necessity of believing upon the Lord Jesus Christ.
John 3:14-16 NAU - "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1933.

6. John closes out this chapter with one more statement on the importance of believing upon Christ, but here he also adds the great tragedy of unbelief.
John 3:36 NAU - "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."
7. In **Verses 32-35** John declares the essence of faith—that the testimony of Christ must be received.
 Genuine faith has the element of belief in an objective truth and reliance upon that truth. The Gospel is the substance of that truth which must be believed.
- A. John is declaring that we must believe in the testimony of the One who has come from above.
- B. He states the problem of humanity in **Verse 32**
John 3:32 NAU - "What He has seen and heard, of that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony."
8. Then John describes the excellence of believing upon the Lord Jesus Christ.
John 3:33-35 NAU - "He who has received His testimony has set his seal to *this*, that God is true. ³⁴ "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵ "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand."
John 3:36 NAU - "He who believes in the Son has eternal life"
9. One would expect John to describe those who do not believe as "Not having eternal life." John says this but then adds something much more dreadful.
John 3:36 NAU - "but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."
10. Tonight I want to preach on this dreadful thought. I title the sermon, "The Tragedy of Unbelief."
- I. First, notice John sets up the contrast as faith versus disobedience
- A. Both faith and repentance are presented in Scripture as commands
Acts 17:30 ESV - "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,"
1 John 3:23 NAU - "This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us."
1. This is the way Paul preached the Gospel. He preached in command mode and commanded obedience to the Gospel.
 The Gospel is always presented as something to be obeyed.
Romans 1:5 NAU - "we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the* obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake,"
Romans 6:17 NAU - "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed"

2. The first reason you should trust Christ is because God commands you to. Martyn Lloyd-Jones – “Why should you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? Is it in order to be delivered or to be helped? Not at all! God commands you. Nothing less! He calls for obedience. He commandeth all men everywhere to repent. It is a command of God that you and I should repent and believe the Gospel. Nothing less!”²
 3. Trusting Christ is not something you add to your life as something optional. It is commanded! Most people think of the Christianity as something that is good for some but not really something they’re interested in. God commands you, “Trust My Son!”
 4. Unbelief is great wickedness. The Father loves the Son. The Father gave that which was most precious to Him in order to redeem lost men. He expects all men to bow before His Son. He commands it.
- B. God makes great promises for those who trust the Gospel
- John 3:16 NAU** - "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."
1. Although we are great sinners God has sent forth His Son to redeem those who trust in His righteousness and follow Him as Lord.
 2. These are glorious promises
Acts 16:31 KJV – “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved. . .”
Romans 10:13 KJV – “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
 3. When a person refuses to trust Christ he makes God out to be a liar. It is to state that they do not want God in their lives. This is great sin. Lloyd-Jones – “Why should I believe the gospel? The first reason that we all should have for believing the gospel is not that it is going to do this, that or the other for me; I should never preach it in that form. I preach this because it is the record that God gave concerning His Son, and I tell you that if you do not believe it you are making God a liar; you are rejecting the Word of the holy, eternal God, and that is the most terrible sin. We are to preach this gospel and then tell men that, if they do not believe it, they are refusing God, and nothing remains for them but perdition and punishment.”
 4. In the Gospel God commands you to trust Jesus and if you trust Him He will save you. God has made this promise. What a tragedy to reject so great a Gospel.
Hebrews 2:3 NAU - "how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"

² Lloyd-Jones, D. M., *Romans: The Gospel of God, An Exposition of Romans 1*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), page 140.

- II. But if a man will not believe the Gospel God's wrath will abide on him
- A. God's wrath is kindled upon all mankind
1. This is God's just response to sin – He is angry with the wicked. His wrath is an infinite fury, a terrible rage against sin.
God's anger isn't reactionary. Rather it is the expression of His holy character towards that which is not holy.
 2. All of humanity is under God's wrath. This is our natural state
Ephesians 2:3 NAU - "Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."
 3. He has revealed this anger to every man
Romans 1:18 NAU - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness"
 4. This explains the universal existence of religion. Human beings know they have broken the Law of their Creator. Religion is the human fig-leaf – human efforts to work out reconciliation.
 5. Not only are we under the wrath of God; it is increasing daily. Paul described it as a great storehouse of wrath each of us is amassing.
Romans 2:5 NAU - "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,"
- B. The issue is, is there any way this wrath can be removed?
1. John is saying in **Verse 36** that if we continue in our unbelief and continue in our disobedience to the Son God's wrath will abide on us.
 2. John uses the Greek word, μένω – it means “to remain, continue, or endure.” If we persist in our denial of Christ's right to reign over us and refuse His gracious sacrifice to satisfy God's divine justice and remove God's wrath His wrath will remain on us.
- C. What does this mean?
1. To be under God's abiding wrath means to be eternally cursed of God. To be cursed of God is to fall under His condemnation. God will consign the sinner into the everlasting torment of hell.
 2. To have God's abiding wrath is to be forever in a hopeless state with no possibility of finding God's favor.
 3. To be under God's abiding wrath is to be denied every blessing from God. In this life we have enjoyed endless tokens of God's mercy and goodness. We enjoy sunshine and rich harvests. We enjoy the companionship with those who love us. We enjoy breathtaking beauty. We have five senses and the means to satisfy each one. God's goodness should overwhelm us.
A, Sadly, human beings take it all for granted and continue to despise their Creator.
Romans 1:21 NAU - "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks"
Romans 2:4 NAU - "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

- B. In eternity, forsaken human beings will thirst and cry out for even the smallest token of God's grace but will find none. Hunger will gnaw at their stomach, thirst will dry their throats.

III. This is the message that must be preached today. It is firmly attached to the Gospel **John 3:36 NAU** - "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

- A. For many today, the love of God has become His only attribute
 - 1. God is seen as this benevolent being who exists to fulfill our needs, desires, and expectations. Preaching is directed to our "felt" needs.
 - 2. God wants us to be happy, wealthy, and have our fantasies fulfilled
 - 3. Most believe that God loves all men equally and has planned wonderful things for all men – sin is not even a consideration.
- B. It is most unpopular to speak of sin and condemnation
 - 1. Some see the wrath of God as an outdated relic that should be rejected by modern man.
 - 2. Many believe that as human beings we have evolved to our present state of excellence and we are growing better and better. We make mistakes but are basically good people.
 - 3. Most today deny the concept of sin and any idea of consequence for sin. Few today tremble at the thought of God being angry with them.
 - 4. Few believe that the most powerful being in the universe is angry and poised to crush them.
 - 5. Most believe that hell is simply inconsistent with the character of a God who is only capable of love. Hell would be much too cruel and violent.
 - 6. The mantra shouted today is, "Thou shalt not judge" and they actually believe that God will not judge them.
- C. We must preach God's wondrous deliverance from God's wrath

Conclusion:

- 1. All men will be held accountable for their soul. The Gospel is set before all. It calls all to trust Jesus Christ as Savior and bow before Him as Lord and King and
- 2. Those who look to Christ shall be saved. He alone is the way of salvation.
John 3:14-15 - "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life."
- 3. But if we forsake Him, the wrath of God abides on us.