

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 2 December 2018

No.: T1070

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The Gospel of Christ Jesus: God's heart of love

Today we begin a new series of six talks looking at the Gospel of Christ Jesus. Our title today is "God's heart of love" and our text is John 3:16. In the next two broadcasts the titles will be, "Decision day is now" and "Consequences of neglect". The other three talks in the series will be broadcast at a later time, all in the Lord's will of course.

Let's begin by reading John 3:16 together. *"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."*

John 3:16 is perhaps the most well-known of all Bible verses. It is used all around the world in proclaiming the Gospel, God's good news. It is so well known that sometimes it is only the reference which is used - John 3:16, or even just "3:16". As we would expect, it is often displayed outside churches or Gospel halls, but it can often be seen, too, at large sporting events and where the crowds gather. Some listening today will be able to recite John 3:16 off by heart. There are many hymns and choruses based around this wonderful verse. From my childhood days, I recall singing:

*Twenty-five words in John three, verse sixteen,
No greater text has there ever been seen.
Twelve about God, and twelve about me,
Son in the centre, verse sixteen, John three.*

*That whosoever surely means me,
Surely means me, surely means me.
That whosoever surely means me,
Surely means even me.*

Anon

Praise God if you know the wonderful joy of God's love in your heart!

Just to give our verse some context, we should note that these words were spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. John 3:16 obviously follows the words Jesus spoke in John 3:14-15, where He said, *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."* Nicodemus would have been familiar with the incident which Jesus was referring to, which we can read in the Old Testament book of Numbers (see Numbers 21:4-9). There we find that the people of Israel were dying in the wilderness as a result of being bitten by the serpents, which had been sent by God as a punishment for their speaking against Him, and against His servant, Moses. We read that many of the Israelites died (Numbers 21:6). And many more would have died if it had not been for Moses interceding for them. He prayed to God (Numbers 21:7), and God answered by giving Moses the instruction to raise a serpent of bronze on a pole, and command the Israelites to look to the bronze serpent, and live (Numbers 21:8-9). So we see that this merciful act of God to His people, Israel, in the days of Moses was in response to their dreadful plight, for they were dying!

When the Lord Jesus said, *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent..."* (John 3:14-15), He was making the comparison to the fact that He, the Son of man, would also be *"lifted up."* I know that the term *"lifted up"*, as used by Jesus (in John's Gospel), means more than being suspended on the cross of Calvary, but it certainly includes that. I understand it conveys the thought that the Son of man would be glorified or lifted up, but by the means of being crucified. We have a similar thought in the words which the risen Saviour spoke to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus when He said, *"Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?"* (see Luke 24:26).

Three times in John's Gospel we read of Jesus speaking about His being *"lifted up"*; here in John 3:16; in John 8:28; and again in John 12:32. There is a great deal of instruction to be found in these verses and if you want a study outline, I suggest they fit well with the words Jesus spoke in John 14:6, when He said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life..."*

I suggest that the context of John 12:32 is "the way", the way by which He would draw all to Himself. In John 8:28 it is "the truth", the truth of who He is, which they would finally realise after His crucifixion. But here in John 3:16 it is "the life", He would be lifted up so that those who believe in Him would have eternal life. The cross was ever before the Saviour as He moved through this world in perfect obedience to the will of God. Well might we sing,

*Lifted up was He to die,
"It is finished!" was His cry:
Now in heaven, exalted high:
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

Philip P Bliss (1838-1876)

We have already mentioned that in the days of Moses, as a result of their rebellion against God, the people of Israel were dying. Dreadful as that was this was only physical death. In the earlier verses in the chapter, Jesus had been speaking to Nicodemus about being "born again" (John 3:3-8), which was a spiritual birth and absolutely necessary for spiritual life. Now He was contrasting the thought of physical death and spiritual death. By looking in faith to the Son of man crucified, man could be the possessor of eternal life, just as in the same way those bitten by the serpent could receive physical life by looking to the bronze serpent.

The term "*perish*" means much more than physical death, but it does not mean annihilation. We read that man was created a living soul and is therefore immortal. The essence of a man, his spirit and soul, will live forever. Physical death (and resurrection) is only relative to our body; our spirit and soul are not subject to physical death. We could quote many Scriptures, but the words of Jesus in Luke 16:19-31 will suffice to prove this. The rich man and Lazarus had both died physically, but they both lived on. The rich man was tormented in Hades but Lazarus was comforted in Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22-23). Note, too, that there was a great gulf fixed between them! Don't be foolish in thinking that if you pass from this life into eternity without Christ as your personal Saviour, that you will get a second chance or be able to extricate yourself from everlasting judgment. That is the force of the word, perish. It means a total loss! I often think about this solemn verse,

*To lose your wealth is much,
To lose your health is more.
But to lose your soul, is such a loss
That nothing can restore!*

Anon

Jesus would have us consider, "*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?*" (see Mark 8:36-37).

Many years ago a man told me that, as he went in and out of the church he attended, he read the text on the notice board. On this occasion, the text was John 3:16. He knew there was something not just right about the wording and he had to stand and carefully think about the verse, quoting it in his mind. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should have everlasting life". Three words were missing. Three small words, but of enormous impact! The missing words were, "not perish but". As we consider that God's heart of love is rightly a manifestation of who He is, for God is love (see 1 John 4:8, 1 John 4:16), we do well to remember that He gave His only begotten Son to die, to make it possible that we can escape eternal judgment and have eternal life.

I know John 3:16 in the Authorised Version ends with the words "*everlasting life*", but the thought is rightly "*eternal life*" (as in John 3:15). Perhaps we could say that eternal life conveys the thought of quality as well as that of quantity. I suppose in view of what we have said previously we could say that all men and women have everlasting life, in that all will have eternal existence (just as the rich man and Lazarus live forever), but that is not what is meant in John 3:16. We can get no better description of eternal life than that which the Lord Jesus Christ Himself gave, as He prayed to His Father, recorded for us in John 17:3. He said, "*And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.*"

Eternal life is the gift of God. How many there have been who have tried to obtain eternal life by some other means, but the Scripture is absolutely clear in its teaching. We read in Romans 6:23, "*For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*", and in Ephesians 2:8-9, "*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.*" We should also say that there ought to be a present enjoyment of this wonderful gift of eternal life. If we are believers in the Lord Jesus

Christ we have a new life in the power of the Holy Spirit now, even whilst we await the coming of the Saviour and our entering into heaven itself.

John 3:16 begins with *"For God so loved..."* and it is right to see that He is the one who first acted in love towards the world. The world, that is the world of mankind, did not deserve God's love. Man was sinful and at enmity with God (see Genesis 3:1-24), but God loved nonetheless. God's love had been seen in the Old Testament, in particular His love for His earthly people, Israel. They had been chosen by God as a special object of His love. We read, *"The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the LORD loved you..."* (see Deuteronomy 7:7-8). But now, from the lips of the Son of God, we learn that God's love is towards the whole world. Can we put a restriction on the word, whosoever? Certainly not! God's love is towards all mankind, and the blessing of salvation is available to all. Does that mean that all men will know God's love? Sadly it does not. There is the important matter of believing, as we find in our verse.

I would find it impossible to speak concerning the Gospel of Christ Jesus without referring to the teaching of the epistle to the Romans, for it is in Romans that the doctrine of the Gospel is taught. Carefully the Apostle Paul sets out the case (almost in a courtroom style) that all men (both Jew and Gentile (or non-Jew)) are guilty before a holy and righteous God. Early in the epistle he concludes that, *"...there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"* (see Romans 3:22-23). That being established, we go on to read, *"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"* (see Romans 5:8).

We need to realise that Paul is writing to Christians, to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore the spiritual blessings he goes on to speak about are only to be known and enjoyed by those who have acted in faith towards God. Only those who have been justified by faith have peace with God (See Romans 5:1), have access into this grace (Romans 5:2), and have hope in the glory of God (Romans 5:2). Only those who are saved are reconciled to God by the death of His Son (see Romans 5:10), and sanctified (that is made holy and set apart for blessing by God). What a wonderful Gospel, the Gospel of Christ Jesus! The Bible teaches that the love that drew salvation's plan, originated in the heart of God Himself. Furthermore, now that we are in a position of blessing we read, *"If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"* (see Romans 8:31-32). Can we take this in? Oh, how God's love should cause our hearts to praise and worship Him. The hymn writer obviously had these verses in mind when he wrote,

*And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die - I scarce can take it in:
That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:*

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!*

Stuart K Hine (1899-1989) © 1953 Stuart K Hine/The Stuart Hine Trust

As we read these words, *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son..."* (John 3:16) in the knowledge of the horrors of Calvary and what the Saviour would have to endure, we can have some understanding of God's heart of love. *"He that spared not his own Son!"* (See Romans 8:32)

We should never underestimate the sufferings which the Lord Jesus Christ endured in His body as He was crucified at Calvary. I have often marvelled at how the Gospel writers seem to have a holy restraint in writing about the sufferings of Christ. Some of the facts of the cruelty He endured are stated, but not elaborated upon. In fact, we get a greater sense of His sufferings in some of the writings of the Old Testament prophets and in the Psalms. Isaiah writes, *"His visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men"* (see Isaiah 52:14). And David wrote in Psalm 22, *"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet."*

But the physical sufferings of crucifixion, horrific as they were, are surpassed by the vicarious sufferings which the Saviour endured on our account for sins which were not His own, for He was sinless. We have already quoted from Psalm 22 which begins, *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?"* (Psalm 22:1) We read in Psalm 69, *"Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me ... Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none."* (Psalm 69:1-2, 20)

Again from the prophecy of Isaiah, *"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... he was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth"* (see Isaiah 53:3, 5, 7).

And from Jonah's prayer, *"For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me... The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever"* (see Jonah 2:3, 5-6).

Although I believe we will never be able to fully grasp the enormity of the sufferings of Christ for sin and sins, we can worship for what we can understand. If we are believers, we know from Paul's writings that, *"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures"* (see 1 Corinthians 15:3). We can say like Peter, *"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree"* (see 1 Peter 2:24). We can rejoice with John that, *"The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin"* (see 1 John 1: 7).

I have an old book in my study which is a help for preachers. I looked up John 3:16 and found this outline entitled, **"The Gospel of the Greatest (John 3:16)":**

The Greatest Love - "For God so loved";
 The Greatest Extent - "the world";
 The Greatest Exhibition - "that he gave";
 The Greatest Gift - "his only begotten Son";
 The Greatest Offer - "that whosoever";
 The Greatest Simplicity - "believeth";
 The Greatest Object of Faith - "in him";
 The Greatest Redemption - "should not perish";
 The Greatest Result - "but have everlasting life."

As we have seen, we can have the assurance and enjoyment of eternal life now only as a result of God's love and His unsparing giving. Out of God's heart of love, He gave His only begotten Son for the world. Receiving Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we are brought into the family of God. We read in the first chapter of John's Gospel, *"But as many as received him, to them gave he [the] right to be children of God"* (John 1:12) In John's Gospel, in a special way the Lord Jesus reveals His Father to His own. We have been considering God's love for the world, but by the time we reach John 16, towards the close of Christ's upper-room ministry, He tells His own that *"The Father himself loveth you"* (John 16:27). How wonderful is that!

We have no time today to develop this wonderful thought of the Father's love, but before I close there is one word in our verse, John 3:16, which I must speak about. I have deliberately left it until the end of my message so it may be an appeal to any who are listening but who have not the assurance of eternal life. The word is *"believeth"*. We have read, *"whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"*. This is the key which unlocks the blessing to us; we need to believe. The force of the word used is much more than accepting the truth of what the Scripture says. Many may believe in a historical Jesus Christ who was born in Bethlehem, lived in Nazareth, taught in Galilee, and died in Jerusalem. Many may accept that He was a good man, and a teacher of sound values. But that is very far short of what believing means in John 3:16. To believe means to have faith in, or to put your trust in, what God has done through the death of His Son for your eternal salvation. I trust this is the personal experience of all who have listened today.

May God bless you all.

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk on The Gospel of Christ - God's heart of love. Talk no. T1070

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