11-19-23

John 3:16

Probably no other verse in the Bible has been preached on or expounded more than this one; so don’t expect anything new. My aim in going through this verse is to focus on something absolutely foundational to the Christian: the Gospel. Sometimes in life, we get involved in things and we tend to forget or neglect the basics; the foundation. Not that we want to change the foundation or fiddle with it; we want to make sure that it hasn’t slipped or weakened. Certainly the Gospel itself will never slip or weaken, but our perception of it might.

Each of us who are followers of Jesus ought to be able to articulate the Gospel in very short order in case we are asked. If someone asks us and they are truly interested, that is no time for us to be trying to come up with an answer. Additionally, the Gospel is something that we ought to meditate on a lot. There is really a lot to think about; a lot of ramifications to it; and, a lot to praise God for. The Gospel itself is very simple; but fleshing it out and living it are lifelong endeavors.

I think all of us know that the word “Gospel” translates into English as “good news”. That is fine, but what is the good news? Well, John 3:16 is a good place to start; the good news is that “*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.*”

Now we might then restate that with something like; God sent His Son Jesus to this earth to live as a man. He suffered and died on the cross in our place, accepting the punishment that we are due. His death was real; He was in the grave for three days; but then He showed that He defeated death by rising from the dead and was brought back into heaven. And these things are also promised to us if we will believe in Him.

That’s the good news; in Jesus Christ, God made a way to do the impossible. He made a way for us to come into His holy presence. As I said earlier, the Gospel message is simple. And we need not be ashamed of it for its simplicity or the fact that it involved the death of the Son of God. It is a phenomenal demonstration of the love God has for us, even in the face of His absolute justice.

As simple as it is, the complexities of the Gospel begin to appear as we dig into John 3:16 and the rest of the Bible. But again, the magnificence of God shines through; all one has to understand is that Jesus died for our sins and that if we truly believe in Him in faith, we will have eternal life. So why dig deeper? Why go to all that work?

As we dig deeper into God’s word, there are riches and treasures there; more precious than gold, because we can bring them with us into heaven. As we seek to more fully understand, we will naturally come closer to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and also, become more like Him. Additionally, the more we learn about God through His word, the more in awe of Him we should become. It ought to draw us to praise Him and worship Him. Remember that worshiping God is the highest calling we have.

In John chapter 3, Jesus has just explained to Nicodemus that He Himself would be a sacrifice so that any who believe in Him would have eternal life. Now in verse 16, Jesus explains why. He begins, “*For God so loved the world.*” This is, of course, the God of the Bible; the Creator of all things and the giver of life to any that have it. It is this God who offers salvation; and He offers it through Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we tend to think of salvation as coming from Jesus, and that is true. At the same time we must remember that salvation is attributed to God many times in the Old Testament. Just one example is Exodus 15:2, “*The Lord is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will extol Him*.” This thought continues in the New Testament. In Romans 16:1 we read: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

We have a beautiful picture of God here. In our natural human state, we are offensive to a holy God and we are the objects of His just wrath; yet He desires for us to be in communion with Him so He has made a way. This is the God we serve as Christians; and this is the God the world rejects in favor of their own autonomy.

The love that God has is represented by that famous Greek word “agape”. Agape is a love that is entirely self-sacrificing; it is a love that gives with no selfish motives. Jesus’ death on the cross is the perfect example of agape love. Paul tells us in Romans 5:10, “*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life*.” There is obviously a lot in this verse but let me just pull out the fact that God offered us salvation when we were His enemies; when we hated Him. That is the agape type of love. Just as an aside, bear in mind that this is the same type of love Jesus calls us to.

Let’s consider “*the world*”. The Greek word used here comes up many times in the New Testament and it has several nuances; but each nuance encompasses an entirety. What do I mean? Well, the world can mean the earth. But when it does, it means the whole earth, not just part of it. It can indicate the universe, or all of creation; and again, it would include all of it, not just some parts. The world can refer to people; when it does it refers to all humankind, not just one group.

We all know that due to the sin of Adam, all the world needs to be redeemed. We see that in Romans 8:20-21, “*For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God*.” Scripture tells us that the earth and heavens will be cleansed by fire and God will create a new heavens and a new earth. After this cleansing, they will no longer be subject to the curse brought about by Adam’s disobedience.

The world of humankind is offered the chance of redemption through the work of Christ on the cross. And the plain sense of “*the world*” here encompasses all people. Jesus died for all mankind. Now, it doesn’t matter if you believe in God’s predestination of the elect or if you believe in some form of free-will choice; Jesus died for all people so that anyone who believes on Him will be saved from God’s wrath.

We see this same idea conveyed in 1 John 2:2, *“[Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.*” God’s offer of salvation is available for anyone; but only if they accept Christ. As Jesus said in John 6:37, “*All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.*”

We can have discussion on what Jesus meant by “*All that the Father gives Me…*”, but the second part is clear: If we turn to Jesus, He will never turn us away. He has already paid the price for our sins and when we look to Him in faith, we receive the redemptive cleansing we need. What a comfort that is, knowing that when we truly turn to Christ, He will take us no matter who we are or what we’ve done.

The next section of this verse shows how much God really does love His world; how much He really does love His created human-beings. He loves us so much that “*He gave His only begotten Son*”. The word “gave” is important. God didn’t tell everyone they had to straighten up first and then He would send Jesus. He sent Jesus to redeem us while we were still mired in the filth of sin. It required the sacrifice that Jesus made for us to be cleansed of our filth and have communion restored with God.

Keep in mind that God doesn’t need us; He never did. He was perfect in love in the eternal state of the Trinity. But He chose to create mankind. He created us to have fellowship with and to shower His unimaginable love upon. And He created us knowing full well that we would rebel; and that He would have to save us from floundering helplessly in sin. And He knew that God the Son would have to become a man to suffer and die in order to restore that fellowship that God desired. But He made us anyway.

The Son that God gave is His “*only begotten Son*.” The NIV and some other translations say His “*one and only Son*”. That translation is fine; it is emphasizing the uniqueness of Jesus. There is only one Jesus Christ and He is truly the Son of God. Jesus is the One necessary for salvation; there is no one else by whom we can escape God’s wrath. He is the only One who can restore our fellowship with the Father.

Along with this, the word “*begotten*” adds some depth. The best word I can think of is “essence”. Essence takes in the likeness and characteristics of a being. If something is begotten, it has the same essence as its parents. Squirrels beget squirrels; they do not give birth to possums or birds. The baby squirrels look and act like their parents; they have the same essence.

It is the same with human-beings. We beget people. Our offspring have the same basic appearance and characteristics that we do.

Now we come to Jesus who is absolutely unique. He is both God and man at the same time; not half and half, but fully God and fully man. This is incomprehensible to us, but the concept of begotten can help. Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. He has her essence. He is a human-being. At the same time, He is begotten of God; so Jesus has the essence of God. This is one of the places that supports the doctrine of the Trinity; that God the Son is one with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, the word “begotten” has sometimes been misunderstood and brought about heresy. In our limited world, begotten is the beginning point of something coming into existence. From this idea, some have tried to teach that Jesus had a beginning; that there was a time when God the Son did not exist. From this comes the idea that Jesus is a created being.

Scripture is clear that this is not the case; the Trinity is present right in the first three verses of Genesis chapter 1. Remember that God created human-beings. Although we are image-bearers, we are not of the same essence as God. The word begotten is used to show that Jesus, as God the Son, is of the same essence as the Father; indeed, one God.

So, God loves us and He has made a way for us in Jesus Christ. The result is “*that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*” First notice that the offer is there for “whoever”. The offer is open to everyone, regardless of how you believe we get to the point of accepting Jesus. While it is very exclusive to only have one way to salvation, that one way is offered to everyone. All they have to do is take it.

Which brings us to the word “*believe*”. This does simply mean that by faith, we believe that Jesus is who the Bible says He is and that He suffered the punishment for our sins. We accept this as a gift that He offers us and that we don’t deserve. And we are grateful for it.

However, we must understand that the belief or faith that we need is more than an intellectual assent to the existence of Jesus. It means consciously accepting the gift of salvation that He offers; it means understanding that He has suffered the consequences of our sins in our place; it means understanding that He is our only hope, that we have no way of reconciling with the Father other than Him; it means submitting to Him as our Lord and Master and King and Saviour. It means our life will change.

Our salvation will have evidence and that evidence is our good works; and importantly, our motivation behind those works. We are always quick to point out that the works do not save us; salvation comes from faith in Christ alone. But as James tells us in chapter 2 verse 17, “*Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.*” Our works become the evidence of our true salvation.

As a sobering thought, think about the fallen angels; satan and the demons. God created them more powerful and glorious than we are. And they believe; as James also tells us: *You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder*. The thing is that their belief is not unto salvation. They were never given a second chance once they rebelled. God would have been just as just and righteous if He had never given us a second chance through Jesus. But give Him praise and worship and gratitude forever, because He did.

Prayer

Creator Lord God, how awesome You are and glorious beyond our ability to even look upon You. Your love for us is beyond measure and Your mercy is everlasting; yet You always remain true to Your character; to who You are. You will not let sin pass; evil must be punished; Your holiness and justice will never be compromised or set aside. Yet all these things have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

How beautiful Your Gospel truly is. Your justice was satisfied by pouring out Your righteous wrath on Jesus. Now You can extend Your mercy to us, if only we accept the work He has done. Thank You for the faith You have given us to believe; please help us in our unbelief.

Help us now Lord, as we live life on this earth, while our citizenship is in heaven. The forces against us are too strong; without Your armor, without Your constant care, we are no match for all the enemies. But we know that our victory lies in Jesus Christ; He has already won, He has already defeated satan and death. And we await the glorious return of our King.

In Jesus’ name we pray

Amen