10-21-18

John 3:14-21

Contained within this passage is probably the most wonderful and beautiful line of Scripture in the whole Bible. “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.” It tells us that God loves us in a way that we can’t even fathom. God was willing to sacrifice His Son, Jesus, in order that we, His rebellious creation, could live. Even more, God the Father and Jesus are One, so the sacrifice was one that God Himself made for us.

The idea of this kind of love is comforting to us. It is reassuring that the God who created the universe and everything in it, is particularly concerned about human-beings; we who were created in His image. Now, this is good news, very good news; But we need to make sure we understand what is being said here. Often times we focus on John 3:16, and don’t pay much attention to what is around it. Really, we don’t even look closely at John 3:16.

We like the “love” part; and that is a very good part. We like 1 John 4:8, where we are told, “God is love”. But 1 John 4:8 is not a complete description of God. In 1 John 1:5 we are told that “God is light”. Consider how often Jesus is referred to as Light in our passage for today. Also, in the Gospel of John 4:24 he tells us that “God is spirit”. Lastly, in Deuteronomy 4:24 Moses says, “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire.” Being a consuming fire is not as comfortable as love, but it is true. And lest we think this is strictly an Old Testament idea, it is repeated in Hebrews 12:29.

Throughout our passage, we read about a contrast between Light and darkness. We must keep in mind that “Light” is being used as a name for Jesus; indeed, He is light. All things are visible in His presence. Additionally, He is light as a description of truth. Truth is not dependent on circumstances or points of view. Truth is absolute and it is real. We also see the word “judgement” a lot. Judgement can have good or bad connotations. It can be the decree of reward for good works or it can be a guilty verdict and pronouncement of condemnation for evil. In our passage today, judgement refers entirely to condemnation.

In order to sort all this out, we need to go back to some very basic ideas and truths that are taught in the Bible, which is the word of God. Let’s look at God’s most wonderful creation: human-beings. People are the very special creation of God because as we are told in Genesis 1:26, we were created in God’s image. That doesn’t mean we look like God, but we have some of His characteristics. We are able to think, we have emotions; and we have a spirit. Thinking of our Scripture from John 4:24 that tells us “God is spirit”, we know that in addition to our physical bodies we have a spirit.

Also, in Genesis 2:7, we are told that after God formed our bodies out of the dust of the earth, He “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”; at this point, “man became a living being”. That same Hebrew word “breathe” also means “spirit”; as long as that God-given spirit remains with us, our bodies have life. We all know that people die. It will happen to each of us. Certainly, there are lots of biological factors involved in declaring someone dead; but ultimately, at death, our spirit leaves us. There is a separation between our body and our spirit. At that time, our body ceases to function, has no consciousness, and begins to turn back into the dust from which it was made.

But what about our spirit? God formed our bodies from the dust, but that spirit was breathed directly into us by Him. It is God’s breath, and God is eternal; by this we know that our spirits are also eternal. Our spirit doesn’t die like our body does. It doesn’t lose conscious activity or awareness.

Now, it only makes sense that our spirit has to exist somewhere. We can’t observe spiritual things so we must turn to the Bible for information on the spiritual world. Indeed, the Bible tells us that the spirit can only go to one of two places: heaven or hell. Heaven is a place of eternal joy where we live in the presence of God. Hell is a place of eternal suffering where we live completely separated from God. It turns out, that we make the choice of where we spend eternity during our life here on earth. To understand this, we must look at the nature of God.

The Bible reveals several things about God, way too many to cover now, but we need to look at a few of them. We’ve already looked at His nature of love. God is love. He loves us and He created us. He created us to have fellowship with. God doesn’t need us, He is perfectly content by Himself; but He chose to make us that we can enjoy Him.

God is merciful. Deuteronomy 4:31, “For the Lord your God is a merciful God.” God desires to be kind, compassionate, and loving toward us; and He is. But we must be sure that we don’t try to take advantage of these attributes of God. We can’t look at these and decide that because God loves us, He won’t hold us accountable for our sins. Yes, sin is real and it is the reason for all the problems we face in the world today, including death.

If we continue to look through the Bible we will discover that God is also holy and He is just. Psalm 22:3, “Yet You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.” And from Psalm 97:2, “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.” So, what does this mean for us? Because God is holy, all sin is abhorrent to Him and completely unacceptable; all sin. What this does is throw out the idea that as long as we are good more often than we are bad, we are okay. We are not; once we sin, we are no longer acceptable to God.

Because God is just, all sin must be punished. We think of forgiveness as just letting something go; in our dealings with others, that is the case. We are sinful ourselves, so we stand on the same moral ground as anyone who has done wrong to us. So, we are called to forgive others even if things are not made right. God is on different moral ground than we are: God is perfect, He does not sin. He can, and does, hold us accountable for any wrong we do. Punishment must take place. And because we sin against an infinite God, punishment is eternal.

Is God, therefore, a tyrant: no. From Ezekiel 33:11 we read, “As I live!’ declares the Lord God, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” From this we see that while God takes no pleasure in punishing the wicked, it still must be done. Yes, He loves us; but sin must be punished. It cannot simply be ignored.

When we consider these things, we come to an inescapable conclusion: We have a problem. By our sinful nature, that we are incapable of overcoming, we are heading for hell. We are heading for an eternal separation from God. Truly, this is not something we want, although many try to avoid this truth by simply not accepting it. In the end, this doesn’t work. In spite of our rebellious nature, it is to our benefit to look at this squarely and learn what is to be done. For us to make things right with God by ourselves is impossible; but with God, all things are possible.

With these things in mind, let us return to our passage from John 3. Even though we are rebellious and obnoxious toward God, He loves us. And because we are helpless to redeem ourselves, He has made a way. One way; not several ways that we get to choose from. Considering that we had no way and deserved no way, it is truly a miracle of the mercy of God that we have a way.

As we see in verse 3:16, that one and only way is God’s only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Notice that God “gave” Him; He “gave” Jesus. What does that mean? Jesus, the Son of God, who is actually one with God, left His glorious place in heaven and became a human-being just like us, except that He never sinned. He lived on the earth, spent a few years preaching, teaching, and preparing the way for the church. And then He was crucified. In this crucifixion, He was punished, even though He had done nothing wrong.

Because God is just, all sin must be punished. But instead of us taking the punishment for our own sins, Jesus took it for us. Now that God’s justice is satisfied, we can be forgiven. The punishment for our sins has been dealt with by Jesus so that we can receive God’s mercy. We can avoid punishment, we can have eternal life in joy with God.

But don’t miss those important words in the middle of verse 16, “that whoever believes”. That is the requirement, the only requirement, for salvation. Many will not accept this because it seems too easy. Many will persist in believing in their own works and miss salvation that is simply by believing; simply by faith. Many will simply reject the truth of God. God provides a way for us to spend eternity with Him, but He doesn’t force anyone to do so. The consequence of not accepting what Jesus did for us though, is enduring the punishment for our sins ourselves.

In verses 17 and 18, we see the reason that Jesus came into the world was to save us from eternal damnation. That was the whole reason for what He did. We had no way to be saved so God made one. Again, consider how much He loves us that He would do this. Our passage specifically tells us that Jesus did not come into the world to judge or condemn the world. Why not? Because the world is already condemned. We are already drowning in our sins, we are already beyond any redemption for ourselves. On our own, we stand condemned before God, we stand deserving punishment. No, Jesus came to save us from that condemnation. When we put our trust in Jesus, our condemnation is gone.

Romans 8:1

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

We must understand what is involved in believing. In verse 16 it says “that whoever believes in Him” and in verse 18 it says “He who believes in Him is not judged”. There are those who do believe that Jesus was a real person. Some believe that He was a prophet, some that He was a teacher, some that He was just a good man. This is not the kind of belief that is being talked about with regard to avoiding condemnation. If we look at verse 18, we see the phrase “in the name of the only begotten Son of God”. In the Bible, using the name like this, is a way of indicating the entire person. It is all of that person’s being and personality. Saving belief is faith in Christ for all that He is: God, Son of God, He who was crucified on our behalf and was raised again from the dead.

If we consider the wording from Romans 8:1, “in Christ Jesus”, we understand that our belief brings us very close to Him, that our trust is in Him alone, that we abide in His presence and receive all we need from Him. We must depend on Him entirely and realize that our own merits are worthless.

Verse 18 makes it very clear that faith in Christ is the only way to avoid condemnation.

He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already.

Suppose you are given a choice: You can reach out your hand and pet a soft and gentle bunny; or you can reach out your hand and have it mashed with a hammer. The choice seems obvious; really, which would you choose? We all have the same choice with regard to eternity. We can reach out to Jesus and receive eternal joy; or we can reject His offer and receive eternal suffering. It seems like an obvious choice. Why then, do so many take the hammer? Why do so many reject Christ? Verses 19 and 20 explain.

This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

Jesus is the Light and He did live in the world as a man. Even now, we can come into His presence; but if we do so, we come to see how evil we really are. To remain in that Light is a wonderful place to be; but to do so means that we admit how helpless we are, we must admit that we are sinners, we must admit that we have to depend entirely on Jesus Christ. Once this is done, we are saved by Christ. We still sin, we still have rough times in life, we often fail when we try to please God; but we are beyond the reach of judgement.

Many will not come into this Light because they prefer to remain in the darkness, that way they can’t see the evil and will continue to practice it. They falsely believe that it is hidden. These will have to pay the consequences of their sin themselves. Notice how at the end of verse 20, we see that the fear is for evil deeds to be exposed. The deeds belong entirely to the person. By staying out of the Light, they can be covered up or justified.

Verse 21 brings us back to the Light and the behavior of those who choose to live in the Light. When we become Christians, we consider what God has done for us, and then by the power of the Holy Spirit, we do what is pleasing to Him. These are deeds that we are not afraid to have seen by others; not to have ourselves uplifted, but to give glory to God. All good things come from God, so if we manage to do something good, it comes from God. As we read, these “deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God”. The Christian does good not because he is good, but because God is good.

We need to go back now and look at verses 14 and 15. The reference here is to something that occurred back while Moses was leading the Israelites through the desert. This is found in Numbers 21. The Israelites began to complain, once again, to God and to Moses. In response to this sin, God sent fiery serpents among the people. This means that God caused an abnormally high number of venomous snakes to be in the area where the people were. The bite from the snake was very painful and burned like fire to those who were bitten. The bite would lead to their death.

In response, the people confessed that they sinned and asked that God would remove the snakes. Instead, God told Moses to make a replica of a snake and put it up on a pole. If an Israelite was bitten by one of these snakes, all he had to do was go look at the replica on the pole and he would live. This healing took place not because the snake was somehow magic, but because the person who looked was acting in faith. Notice that the snakes were still there, the pain of the bite was still there, the suffering was still there. Also, the person bitten had to believe that by getting to the image of the snake and looking at it, he would be healed.

And so, we have: As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.

Jesus Christ was lifted up on a cross. If, by faith, we look to Him, in the fullest sense of the word, we will have eternal life. Evil is still here, we will still suffer in this life, we live our lives with pain; but by trusting in Christ Jesus, we will live eternally in peace and joy.

Prayer

Father God, we are so grateful for Your mercy. In Your love and mercy, You have made a way for us to be in Your presence forever. Because of our sinfulness, our way to You was barred; we could not enter Your presence. But You overcame this through Your Son.

Lord Jesus, You willingly sacrificed Yourself to make peace between us and our Father. What You went through was in obedience to Your Father; but still, it was in love for us. Thank You, Jesus; without You we have no way to everlasting life.

Holy Spirit, it is by Your power that we have the faith and understanding to accept the work that Christ did for us on the cross. Work in our hearts and minds to bring us ever closer to our Saviour, Jesus. We long to be more like Him; it is by Your work that we become so.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen