

## For God So Loved the World

In one of the most familiar passages in God's word, Jesus tells us in John 3:16, **"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."** From this one passage we can learn that God gave us His Son, and that God wants us to believe in Him, and believe in Him so much so that to not believe in Him will keep us from salvation in Him. Faith, or belief, is a fundamental part of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Without it we remain eternally lost in our sins.

The reason belief is so paramount and such a necessary part of the Gospel plan of salvation is because of Whom we must believe, and that is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We must believe in Him because He alone will be able to stand with us on the Day of Judgment and declare us "Not guilty!" before His Father, the Great Judge. He is able to do that because only He was able to fulfill the demands of the Law and satisfy His Father's stipulations of justice for the penalty of sin. Only He was able to make us righteous because He is righteous and only He is holy. And His baptism, which we studied this morning, occurred at the beginning of His earthly ministry. It was also the beginning of His demonstrated manifestation **"to fulfill all righteousness"** (Matthew 3:15).

The questions and issues surrounding the baptism of John and why Jesus was baptized have been studied from many angles. My estimation, as discussed this morning, is that John's baptism of Jesus was in keeping with the Old Testament thought in regards to how Jesus came to fulfill, not destroy, the Law of Moses (Matthew 5:17). His baptism was not something new but rather the beginnings of the Messianic age with the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and it was perceived by Israel (including the religious leaders of the day) as such. It was a call to repentance because **"the Kingdom of God was at hand"** and John was **"preparing the way of the Lord."** So Israel responded and **"they were baptized of him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."** The baptism of John was to initiate Israel as the **"Kingdom of priests"** that God had originally ordained. John's baptism also had a very pragmatic reason of "revealing" just Who is the Messiah. John would know Who is the Messiah by the Spirit's descent upon the Lord.

The baptism of Jesus was to **"fulfill all righteousness."** Jesus fulfilling all righteousness is tied directly into God loving us so much that He gave us His Son. This had nothing to do with a *need* for Jesus to repent, but rather, it is to be understood as a reference to Jesus complying with His Father's will in everything, including acknowledging John's baptism, just as those other Israelites who were baptized by John were doing. As the rest of Israel, Jesus identified Himself with the Father's program in that unfolding Messianic age. However, Jesus would not simply be another "priest" of Israel, He would be **THE** faithful High Priest Who would offer Himself **"once and for all"** (Hebrews 7:27). His baptism also had a very pragmatic reason, **"that He might be revealed to Israel"** (John 1:31). That

day when John baptized Him, Israel knew by the Spirit's descent and the Father's voice of approval that Jesus, indeed, was the promised Messiah, a demonstration of God's love for His people in keeping His promises to them!

Let's take a look at the verses just before and after John 3:16 so that we can get the context as to what we are being told. John 3:14-17 says,

***"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved."***

I do not know if you are aware of this, but speaking of the cross in many corners is regarded as an old fashion notion, a myth, or even just a silly superstition. There have even been efforts made to belittle the bloodshed on the cross, with some actually promoting that all references to Christ's blood be taken **out** of our hymnals.

I believe Acts 20:28 should be read to these individuals. Paul said, ***"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He has purchased with His own blood."***

Too many people today are caught up with the carnal thought that teaches that our human standard of morality is good enough. But it is not men we are to please, it is God. Good, moral people are to be commended, but simply being good and moral does not save anyone. All one needs to see to confirm this is the example of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert in the *Book of Acts*. He was called devout, and one who feared God and gave much alms to the people. You could hardly ask for a better description of a goodly man, and yet in spite of how good and how moral he was, he was lost. He still needed Jesus, for no one will be saved outside of Christ!

Many, I believe, fail to see the purpose of Christ's death. Many, like the Pharisees in Luke 18:9-14, fail to see the need of salvation in Christ.

***"And He spoke this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 'Two men went up into the Temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a Publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this Publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the Publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto Heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for***

***everyone that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted.***” The Publican understood his need. He understood that he was a sinner who was in dire need of God’s mercy.

If we are not in Christ then God will not hear our pleas. Isaiah 59:1-2 says,

***”Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear.”***

God will hear us when we humble ourselves, as did the Publican. Psalm 34:18-19 says,

***”The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saves such as be of a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivers him out of them all.”***

A study of church and secular history, for that matter, shows how mankind lurches between reverencing the past and ridding itself of what it perceives to be its encumbrances. The Reformers saw themselves as the new King Josiah whose reforms of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC are told in the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Book of the Kings*. Josiah is commended for having cleansed the Temple of centuries of accretions that had obscured the true meaning of worship. He found two things there during his reformation. One of these he dusted off, and honored: it was the long-neglected *Book of the Law*. The other one, however, he threw on the scrap heap because of its superstitious associations. This was an object known as *Nehushtan*, literally meaning ‘that bronze thing’. The relic was as old as the *Book of the Law* itself, maybe much older. But Josiah did not like it, for it was said to have corrupted the people. So out it went.

If that ‘bronze thing’ could have talked, it would have told a strange and marvellous story. So precious was it that it had been laid up in a place of honor in the Temple like the bones of a saint. It was none other than the image of the serpent that Moses had set up in the desert as a prophylactic against the snakebites that plagued the children of Israel on their wilderness journey. We heard about it in our earlier reading: whoever looked upon that image would be cured and would survive. In today’s Gospel, Jesus takes up that story and speaks of Himself in the light of it. ***“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.”*** The message is clear. The serpent was there for the people’s healing: you looked, and you lived. Grace through gazing. It was as simple as that. Whoever believes in Him, says Jesus, has eternal life, by which the Apostle John means sharing in the life of God Himself, not only hereafter, but here and now. You look; you believe; you live.

Jesus being **“lifted up”** is one of John's most important phrases. It comes three times in the Gospel. In a bad-tempered argument with the Pharisees that ends with an attempt to stone Him, Jesus speaks about Who He is and why He has come into the world: **“when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I Am”** (John 8:28). It was no accident that Jesus used the words **“I Am,”** in this situation, for these were the same mysterious, ineffable name of Israel's God Who had revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush by stating the words, **“I Am that I Am.”** And Jesus will be disclosed to the world when *they*, His enemies, have **“lifted Him up.”**

We begin to glimpse what this will mean, what it will cost Him. Later on, Jesus speaks of how His hour has come when God will glorify His Son. **“And I when I am lifted up from the Earth will draw all people to Myself”** (John 12:32). And now John makes his meaning clear. **“He said this to indicate the kind of death He was to die”** (John 12:33). Crucifixion is what the story is inexorably leading up to: this much is already clear so early on in the *Gospel of John* when Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night in the third chapter. These three predictions about being **“lifted up”** punctuate the text like hammer blows driving the nails into the flesh of Jesus.

There is a marvellous ambiguity about that phrase. In one sense, the beloved Apostle John means it literally: Jesus will be **“lifted up”** to die, hoisted up in crucifixion as a mark of public humiliation and disgrace. But in a deeper sense, the sense that for John really matters, He will be **“lifted up”** on a throne to reign, the One Whose Kingdom is not of this world, Whose meat is to do the will of Him Who sent Him and to finish His work. And so He cries out from the cross in John 19:30, not in defeat, but in triumph: **“It is finished!”** It is the answer to His prayer. **“Father, glorify Your name”** (John 12:28). At the cross we see transfiguration again, the glory of the only begotten Son, full of grace and truth. And if you were to ask John where that glory shines out in all its fullness, he would tell you: at Golgotha, the place of divine self-emptying, of love poured out, the place of pain and mercy where we look and live, where we believe and are given back our lives; where a broken world is mended and healed.

So the bronze serpent of the desert looks forward to the cross. The Apostle John's great elaboration of Jesus' words makes it plain: **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone Who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.”** Were there ever more comfortable words uttered than these?

Perhaps there's another echo, another foreshadowing, in today's Gospel reading. Recall the man who led his only son **“whom he loved”** on that terrible walk up Mount Moriah. There he, too, **“lifted up”** his eyes to Heaven as he took the knife to slay his son. I do not say that I understand how God could be likened to Abraham who was ready to sacrifice His son. Yet the prophet says of the suffering servant that **“it was the will of the Lord to bruise Him”** in Isaiah

53:10. Love has its cost, and remember this when you hear or read the words, ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.”***

Now, notice that Christ represents the Father to us as none else than the all-loving and magnetic one, and He brings us through Himself to the Father. Everything Christ does tends to help us to acquire a loving confidence in the Father, ***“For God so loved.”*** As John would later write in 1 John 4:7-11, ***“7. Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. 8. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. 9. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. 10. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins. 11. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”***

To simply fear the Father confers no benefit; but to bear to Him a companionable love of rare quality makes us blessed, indeed. Now, Christ says here, the Father so loved the world that He gave His beloved child for the world, and instituted for us a way to come to Him. That way is Christ alone. As Jesus said in John 14:6, ***“no one comes to the Father, but by Me.”*** I have often said that faith alone is not sufficient before God, but the price of redemption must also be in evidence. The demons, too, believe in God, but tremble (James 2:19), for they are without means and Mediator.

What is now the cost of redemption? The Holy Spirit teaches everywhere that we do not possess the Father except through a Mediator, and He will not allow us to approach the Father without one. Now, there are many today who teach us to approach the Father without a Mediator, through our own good works. That means we must reject Christ as a Mediator, as Jeremiah tells us so did the godless in his day: ***12. “Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate,” says the Lord, 13. “for My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”*** (Jeremiah 2:12-13) Their plans did not result as they intended they should. Therefore, let us never join them. It would be at the peril of our lives, for we should be despising the priceless sacrifice which the Father made for us. But let us thank the Father for ordering it as He has, and placing between us One Who is God and equal with God, and also man, on a level with man; for we are human and He is God. Where God and man oppose each other, man meets with instant destruction, for he cannot stand against God. God has intervened by placing as Mediator One Who is alike true God and true man. Through Him we are to come to the Father; with the price we can pay nothing is accomplished.

God the Father loved us so much in His beloved Son, that He did so even before the foundation of the world was laid (Ephesians 1:4). Therefore, as Christ cannot perish, those of us who are clothed in Him (Galatians 3:27) cannot perish nor die,

if we remain in Him by saving faith unto death. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:31-32, ***"If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?"***

Some of our brethren have the same attitude after baptism they had before they were baptized. How sad it is that so many of those who claim to be of Christ do not show it in their deeds and in their lives. They have forgotten that they were purged from their sins by the blood on the cross, and that being converted means one no longer walks in the way of the world, but in ***"newness of life"*** (Romans 6:4). People seem to forget or worse yet, ignore, the fact that everyone who is in Christ is commanded to grow spiritually. It is not just the job of the elders or the preacher to learn and grow. It is the responsibility of everyone, especially in light of the great sacrifice on the part of God to grant us forgiveness of sins and eternal life through His Son. Growing spiritually is not optional. If you are not growing spiritually, especially if you are not ***wanting*** to grow spiritually, then you really need to take a good, long, hard look at yourself and examine your life in light of God's word. If you do not believe what I am saying, do not take my word for it. Take Peter's instead. He writes in 2 Peter 1:5-10,

***"And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that you shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacks these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and has forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if you do these things, you shall never fall."***

Then learn from this lesson to know Christ aright and to hold Him between yourself and the Father. Let Him alone be the sacrifice which shall secure Heaven and salvation for yourself. Remember how the Lord came to save, not to condemn. He who has obedient, saving faith will not be lost, but will be saved, since it is true that naught accomplishes our salvation except Christ alone, Who came into this world for the express purpose of being our Savior. Then believe on Him, and grow spiritually in Him. In the words of the Lord, He calls everybody, and even threatens as well as calls, concluding thusly:

***"He who believes in Him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."*** (John 3:18)