

Sunday Night, May 27, 2007 – Notes: [Good News](#). [Bad News](#). [Christ Above All](#).

Order of events:

1. Opening prayer.
2. Praise God with song.
3. Praise God with corporate prayer.
4. Praise God with study of His Word.
5. Close (blessing, reminder of the Gospel, prayer)

Read John 3:14-36. This section of John contains the conclusion of Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus and then finishes with the last words we hear from John the Baptist in this gospel, which confirm the message Christ has just given. Jesus tells us:

**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.**

And John tells us:

**John 3 {36} Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.**

The whole section clearly presents two ways of life, two choices we have: believe and have life abundantly – now and forever; do not believe, or disobey, and live under the wrath of God – now and forever. [1] As Master Yoda would say, “Do or do not. There is no try.” It’s black and white: very exclusive. Perish – eternal life. Light – darkness. Condemned – not condemned. Believe – not believe. Truth – wickedness. Let’s begin with John 3:14-16.

**John 3 {14} And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, {15} that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. {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.**

What things strike you about these verses?

Some have said that “this is all the Bible we need.” Let me warn you that that is dangerous thinking. God gave us his entire Word for a reason and we are not to presuppose on it. We take the whole of God’s teachings and learn and study and practice and meditate and cherish them all. They are a grand tapestry that needs to be seen complete. But given all of that, there are absolutely volumes of wisdom to discuss from just these verses. Remember the author’s motto, “A word is worth a thousand pictures.”

A few things here really jump out at me. Last time we discussed the bronze serpent story from Numbers 21 quite thoroughly. And we discussed how this story not only represents turning from their sins to the saving grace provided by God, but that this story also symbolizes God’s love for his people, Israel. Notice the parallelism in the two statements:

Moses lifting the serpent à God so loved the world  
The Son of Man must be lifted up à he gave his only Son  
Whoever believes has eternal life à whoever believes has eternal life.

Last time we discussed what it means to “believe.” And as I said, if you have not wrestled with this concept, you should give it some deep consideration. Believing is simply accepting and responding: two sides of the same coin. It is not merely nodding our heads to the facts. We will discuss this a little more when we visit verse 36. Notice the wording after each “believe” phrase, “may have eternal life” and “should not perish but have eternal life.” Do the “may” and “should” seem less than 100% surety to you? The words struck me as odd. As a technologist, I don’t like phrases like “may,” and “might,” and “should;” they don’t communicate confidence. Some translations, like the NIV, do strengthen one of the phrases a bit, but most use these terms. Let me assure you, that this is no cause for alarm. There are numerous other passages within your Bible that state these facts with absolute certainty. Two are as close as John 3:18 and 36. 1 John 5:12, John 6:40, John 11:25, and Mark 16:16 are just a few. I can imagine translating the Greek here is quite a challenge.

Two other items jump out at me from these verses; one is the word “perish.” “Perish” is an uncommon word for us today. Sure we have some concept of what it means, but do we stop to think of what it means here? Some have taken the word “perish” from John 3:16 and used it to support a doctrine of annihilation – those that don’t have eternal life with Christ simply cease to exist when they die. This obviously doesn’t fit with other Scriptures. Probably the clearest use of the word today is when we use the term “perishable” to describe items that need refrigeration. The items come to ruin. They no longer suit their intended purpose. They are repulsive and destined for the rubbish bin. That is a future apart from God.

The last bit of these verses that really grabs me is the tiny word “so.” “Such a love as that which induced God to give his only begotten Son to die for the world could not be described – Jesus Christ does not attempt it. He has put an eternity of meaning in the particle [adverb] “so,” and left the subject for everlasting contemplation, wonder and praise, to angels and men.” [3] And the phrase that surrounds it rings down through the halls of time forever: “For God so loved the world...” Read also the following scriptures: Rom 5:8; Eph 2:4; 2 Thess 2:16; 1 John 4:10; Rev 1:5. Is there any concept more clearly taught in the Scriptures. What a patient, kind, merciful, and loving Creator we have.

As a side, a lot of discussion and debate has been centered around the term “world” in the phrase “God so loved the world.” The Greek word kosmos [κοσμος] has been stretched to its outer limits trying to make it fit with various theologies. The first obvious thing from this passage is that John means people: “whoever.” He is not meaning planet Earth and its natural systems; although, before the Fall, God declared his creation good. Nor does John mean the pleasures of the world or the governments, cities, systems, or creations established by men. Nor does he mean the universe and stars – Carl Sagan’s cosmos. Kosmos has at least seven clearly defined uses in the New Testament. [5] And God gave his Son for “whoever would believe,” which is the “world of the godly.” Jesus is just finishing his discussion with Nicodemus where he has told him that God must give you new life in the Spirit in order for you to “see” or “enter” the kingdom of God. God gave his Son for those whose minds he would open. Phrases like *world*, *everybody*, and *all men* are sometimes difficult to get our minds around.

There is a parallel with the story of God sending the poisonous snakes and the bronze serpent and the phrase “God so loved the world.” Would it have made any sense for God to send poisonous serpents to anyone other than his people Israel? God disciplines those he loves (Heb 12:6); as we will see, he punishes and condemns the “world of the ungodly.” It seems clear to me, and the document at [5] examines this issue thoroughly, that the “world” referred to by Jesus denotes believers only. I don’t think this is any more exclusive than saying you cannot understand the things of God unless you are born again – unless God lets you! Jesus’ reference to “the world” was to let Nicodemus know that the kingdom of God would be an international kingdom, which would include the Gentile world.

**John 3 {17} For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. {18} Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.**

What does God impress upon you with these words?

It was commonly understood that when Messiah came he would establish his kingdom with power and depose the Gentile world. He would be empowered by God's spirit to deliver his people and establish his kingdom: king of the Jews. He would be a political and military leader who would defeat all enemies of the Jews and establish a golden era of peace. This thinking was not in error; it was just mistimed. Scripture does refer to Messiah as a king and conqueror (Isa 9:6; Isa 11; Dan 9:25-26; Mic 4; Mal 3:1-6) as well as a suffering servant (Isa 52:13-53:12). Jesus' crucifixion was a stumbling block to many a Jew (1 Cor 1:23). Jesus came the first time as a suffering servant. His second coming will be with power and majesty! (Rev 2; 11; 19) where he will rule with a "rod of iron."

How gracious and kind and loving is our God. Jesus seems to be driving a point home here with Nicodemus, trying to correct his thinking. Nicodemus, God is not some maniacal, punishing, angry monster; he loves you. He continuously throughout history and into the future works to bring us back to himself. He gave us the Law and the Prophets, not as punishment, but to point us back to him. He gave the poisonous snakes to make the children of Israel turn and run to him. He sent his beloved Son to save us from condemnation. He does not wait with a stick behind his back. He is not angry with us. His arms are open wide. He waits patiently for us to repent. In the story of the land owner and the vineyard he hired out (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-18), notice what he says: "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." Most of us would have sent in the Marines to clobber those guys, or at least the sheriff to evict them.

If that's the way God feels, then that's the way we should act as well. God says through Paul in 2 Cor 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation." Notice how Christ deals with open, blatant, acknowledged sinners in the gospels; he never condemns them. God did not come to condemn (we are condemned already) us; he came to rescue us from that condemnation. When we talk to others about the gospel, we ought to come sensing their emptiness and hurt, offering a relationship to the one who loves them, not condemning them. What beautiful words of God we can bring to a troubled life, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom 8:1)

"Verse 18 says that condemnation does not wait until the end of life. It is already going on. The Bible takes the position that mankind is living under the wrath of God all the time. Psalm 90:9 states it plainly. The wrath of God is the anger, the anguish and the agony we feel as a result of trying to do our own thing. We do not have to wait for wrath. If we do not choose to leave it we remain in it; we are 'already condemned,' that is the point. If you are traveling on a wrong road and every so often you see a signpost that points the way to the right road, but you persist and go by all those signposts, refusing to take the way back to the right road, then you remain wrong. That is God's view of life." [1] What will be consummated in the final judgment has already begun. [3]

**John 3 {19} And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. {20} For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. {21} But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.**

### What is it that condemns us?

“Condemn” and “condemnation” are legal or judicial words which mean someone is declared guilty and worthy of punishment. They are the opposite of “justify” and “justification.” (Matt 12:37; Rom 5:16-18) [2] So, Jesus answers the unasked question, “What judgment condemns us?” Instead of loving the light that God sent us, we loved darkness. The reason men will finally perish is “not that they came into the world with a perverted and corrupt nature, which is true; nor that they lived many years in the practice of sin, which is also true; but because they refused to receive the salvation which God sent to them.” [3] No one will be in heaven who does not want to be there; no one will be in hell (separated from God) who did not chose to be there. Light has come into the world.

Notice that Jesus links *belief* with *deeds*: deeds “carried out in God,” or “wrought in God.” These righteous deeds are done by the power of God; God produces them. This is somewhat of a sensitive subject with many: faith and works. I frankly don’t understand the controversy. How can the Bible be any clearer on a topic? True faith produces obedience. (Jam 2:18-20) You cannot *love* darkness and not be condemned. When God the Holy Spirit takes up dwelling within you, you cannot stay the same; it is impossible! Sure a child of God will sin, but their response will eventually be to drag that sin out into the light of God to be killed once and for all. (Rom 6:6; 7:24; Gal 5:24; Col 3:5) God simply will not leave us in sin. He came to set us free. And he has made it clear that our sins do not keep us from coming to him. There is a test here: when Jesus calls, do you come to the light or remain in the darkness?

This is the end of our Lord’s discourse with Nicodemus. Full of grace and truth, Jesus takes the time to correct and instruct this seeker. Though we are not told here, we see in later chapters that this encounter had a significant effect on Nicodemus – a most blessed effect. As we discussed last time, in John 7, Nicodemus defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin. And in John 19 he is there with Joseph of Arimathea giving Jesus a proper burial, “bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight” for the body of our Lord.

### Does the gospel presented by Jesus here seem exclusive to you?

Jesus’ gospel discourse seems quite exclusive. Jesus is the only source of salvation. Those who do not believe are condemned, excluded from eternal life. No matter how religious or immersed in good works or sincere, everyone must be born again. There is no promise of life for those who will not turn to the light. This message is counter to our culture in the west today. In the spirit of tolerance, political correctness, and relativism, this message does not sit well with the majority today. There is an excellent article in Newsweek (May 21, 2007 pp. 43 ff.) titled, *A Portrait of Faith*, that shows the chasm between Jesus’ message and the ideas of our times. Many are surprised when Pope Benedict XVI states that “belief in Jesus is the only thing that will save the world.” The Pope’s book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, “will please a small group of Christians.” [6] Jesus’ words are echoed throughout scripture: Matt 7:14 “For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Verses 22-36 is the last we hear of John the Baptist and his last words in this gospel, and oh what wonderful and powerful words they are! John the Baptist appears as a confirming witness to what has just been recorded.

**John 3 {22} After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. {23} John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized {24} (for John had not yet been put in prison). {25} Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification.**

**{26}And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.”**

So Jesus and his disciples wandered out into the countryside of Judea and set up shop preaching and baptizing, not far from where John and his disciples were at Aenon. We are told later in chapter 4 that Jesus himself did not do the baptizing, but his disciples did it in his name. It was a time of transition. People were still coming to and remaining with John even after he had pointed out Jesus as the Christ. Evidently some discussion arose about the differences and properness of the two baptisms; so, they came to ask John about the matter. John then, very humbly and wonderfully, clarifies the whole matter.

**John 3 {27} John answered, “A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. {28} You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ {29} The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. {30} He must increase, but I must decrease.”**

Does John the Baptist sound like such a radical here?

“How clearly he answers in three important statements the implications of his own disciples that Jesus is his rival. First, he declares that all position comes only from God. That great statement is true whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian. It is true whether you are a Communist, an atheist, an infidel, a pagan, a Buddhist, a Mohammedan or whatever; it does not make any difference. All position in this world comes from God. Many men think they have won their way to power by their own efforts, by their intelligence, their hard work, even by their devious business practices which they sometimes love to take credit for.

“There is a God in heaven who lifts men up and puts men down, and that he alone can exalt, as he can also dethrone. Many a man needs to learn this. John the Baptist knew that all position comes from God. John had been given a role in which he could take great joy and glorify God, but it was not the role of the Messiah. That belonged to Jesus.

“Secondly, John knew his own role right from the start. ‘Don’t you remember that I told you ‘I am not the Messiah’?’ he reminded his disciples. ‘If you think I am, you are departing from what I myself have taught you. I am not the Messiah. I have been sent before him. I am fulfilling the word of Isaiah and Malachi. I am the forerunner, the voice crying in the wilderness ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,’ {cf, Isa 40:3}.

“And thirdly, ‘I am filled with joy at what is happening.’ What a great word this is! John says, in effect, ‘When I see crowds of people leaving me and going to Jesus I delight in that because Jesus can do for them what I could never do. For their sakes I rejoice. Jesus is the bridegroom come to claim his bride. He is receiving those who believe in him; that is his bride. I am the friend of the bridegroom; I am the best man at the wedding. I have a certain role to fulfill, but I rejoice when the bridegroom claims his bride.’ John is delighted to be *just* the best man at the wedding. ‘It fills my heart with joy to see them leaving me and going to Jesus.’

“Then he utters that great word which ought to be echoed by every Christian: ‘He must increase; I must decrease.’ That is so different from how we ordinarily feel. John says, ‘Jesus must increase. I am on the way out, and that is fine with me.’ Years ago as a young preacher I read a word from a great Scottish theologian, James Denny, who put it this way: ‘You can never at the same time convince people that you are a great preacher and that Jesus is a great Savior.’ It is one or the other. I hope that my own heart echoes this word of John the Baptist, ‘He must increase.’ I and all other preachers must decrease.” [1]

Then comes the coup de grâce, “Let me tell you about the ultimate person in the universe who speaks the ultimate truth.”

**John 3 {31} He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. {32} He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony. {33} Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. {34} For he whom God has sent utters 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. {36} Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.**

Isaiah 55:8-9 says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Jesus is of heaven and far greater than John who is of earth. Jesus ranks supreme, above all, over Moses, the Prophets, and John. It’s amazing to John that the vast majority of mankind do not and will not receive the testimony of Jesus whose very words are the words of God. “No one” is a figure of speech here meaning the majority. Verse 33 tells us that some receive his testimony – when their eyes have been opened. And when they do, the truth of God resonates within their very being because the Spirit of God is fully in the transmitter and the receiver. The old Living Bible paraphrase of these verses is quite clear.

**He has come from heaven and is greater than anyone else. I am of the earth, and my understanding is limited to the things of earth. He tells what he has seen and heard, but how few believe what he tells them! Those who believe him discover that God is a fountain of truth. For this one – sent by God – speaks God’s words, for God’s Spirit is upon him without measure or limit. The Father loves this man because he is his Son, and God has given him everything there is. And all who trust him – God’s Son – to save them have eternal life; those who don’t believe and obey him shall never see heaven, but the wrath of God remains upon them.**

Jesus is the ultimate Person in the universe and he speaks the ultimate truth. John tells us that Christ is infinitely above every teacher, prophet, or messenger and his message is to be believed.

This section of scripture clearly presents two ways of life, two choices we have: belief and unbelief, eternal life and condemnation, light and darkness, mercy and wrath. When we hear the words of Jesus, and God has opened our minds to our brokenness, we can choose life and life abundant.

[Does the Scripture \(and hence God\) call us to test ourselves to see if we are in the faith? Where? How can we know for sure?](#)

John 3:20-21; 14:15; 15:10; 1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; 1 John 1 and 2; 4:20; Eph 5:9; Gal 5:22; 2 Pet 1:3-15

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