

Christ's First Gospel Sermon

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And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God (Jn. 3:14-21).

Introduction

In the verses before us we have the second part of our Lord's doctrinal discussion with the learned teacher Nicodemus. In verses 3 through 10 Jesus instructs him about the crucial doctrine of the new birth. When it becomes obvious that Nicodemus does not understand our Lord's teaching on this topic at all, Jesus rebukes him for his unbelief and then proceeds to explain the importance of His own teaching and ministry. In verse 13 our Lord tells Nicodemus in a somewhat ambiguous manner that He is divine, that He lived and then came down from heaven to earth and has been incarnated to give men the truth. In verses 14 and following Christ speaks about His sacrificial death on the cross and justification. Although Nicodemus failed to grasp the Savior's teaching on the new birth, Jesus continues with profound teaching on the very heart of the gospel. In our Lord's first discourse, near the very beginning of His ministry, He points to the cross of Calvary. This teaching proves that Jesus, in His human nature, was aware from the beginning that He came to die as a vicarious sacrifice for His people. He left the throne room of heaven behind with the express purpose of living a life of perfect obedience in humiliation even to the point of death—the death of the cross. As God the Son, He knew about His sacrifice from eternity. As the Son of Man, there perhaps was a point of time in His life when the suffering of Golgotha became the central focus of His mind. One thing is clear, from the beginning of His ministry and onward, it is evident that He was living in anticipation of the cross.

The Serpent Lifted Up

When Jesus approaches the topic of His sacrificial death, He does *not* present this doctrine as something completely new but rather uses a significant type from Numbers as an object lesson on His own crucifixion. That He chooses an incident connected with Moses, of

whom the Pharisees had the highest regard, is no accident. This historical incident would spark the attention of Nicodemus: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (vs. 14-15).

The story to which Jesus alludes is found in Numbers 21:4-9. The Jews were wandering in the wilderness with Moses as their spiritual and political leader. As they traveled around the land of Edom—a dry inhospitable area—they became very discouraged and spoke bitterly against God and Moses. As a result, God sent fiery serpents among the people. The bites of these snakes produced an agonizing death. The severity of this judgment against sin caused the people to confess their sins and ask Moses to intercede on their behalf. After Moses prayed for the people, God gave him specific instructions as to how those bitten could live. Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a pole so everyone in the camp could see it and anyone who looked upon the bronze serpent would be completely healed. This historical incident serves as an illustration of man’s predicament because of sin, Christ’s provision of salvation by His atoning death on the cross and the method by which sinners are to obtain Jesus’ saving benefits. Let us examine each point of resemblance.

First, in each case (Num. 21 and Jn. 3) the people are presented as guilty sinners under God’s condemnation who need the gift of salvation. The Israelites were in exceptional distress due to the bites of poisonous snakes. The poison was so strong that a bite resulted in physical death. The punishment for sin in John 3 is spiritual death or eternal condemnation (the word “perish” is contrasted with “eternal life” in verses 15 and 16). In Numbers, the rebellious Jews are faced with severe pain and physical death. This is only a type of the eternal death and hell that all men apart from Christ are under due to sin. In Jesus’ presentation of the gospel, the problem of sin and guilt is noted before the remedy is explained. We must be made aware of our lost condition before we look to the Savior.

Second, in each case, the remedy for sin is exhibited publicly before the people. As the serpent was lifted up, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. The verb “to lift up,” when used of Christ in the fourth Gospel, always applies to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. In 8:28 our Lord said to the Jews, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.” Note also 12:32 where the Savior says, “I, if I be lifted up from the earth.” John explains these words saying, “This He said, signifying by what manner of death He should die.” That Christ was crucified up on a cross near a busy road outside the city *publicly* is significant as: (1) An aspect of His humiliation. He was exhibited before the people as a guilty, condemned criminal even though He was sinless and innocent. (2) An indication that the gospel (the message regarding His substitutionary sacrifice) would be made public or preached to the whole world. About our Lord’s head on the cross was a statement of His kingship in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. (3) A veiled reference to his coming glory and majesty. The verb “lifted up” (*upsoō*) is also used of Jesus’s ascension to heaven and exultation (e.g., see Ac. 2:33; Phil. 2:9). Of all the New Testament authors, John was the most likely to use words in a manner designed to call to mind multiple yet related meanings. To the physical eye, the lifting up of the Mediator on the cross

was the uttermost of humiliation and degradation. But simultaneously, the eye of faith sees the death blow to Satan, the conquering of sin, the extirpation of guilt, the winning of the war against the fall and death. The glory of the empty tomb, the ascension to the Father and the rule at God's right hand flowed from the bloody cross on Golgotha. There are a number of other things about this exhibition that are noteworthy.

(1) The exhibition of the serpent and Christ were both sovereign acts of grace on the part of God. The remedy for sin is something that God only can provide. This text is another of the multitude of passages which teach salvation only by the grace of God. This observation is in keeping with John 3:16: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."

(2) As there is only one serpent to behold, there is only one Savior of sin. This reality is in keeping with the many passages which teach that Jesus is the only way to heaven (Jn. 14:6). "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Ac. 4:12). If there were any Jews in the wilderness who attempted to be healed by another means—whether a salve, an herbal concoction, or by looking to Moses, the law or anything else—they would have certainly dropped dead. Redemption is by Christ alone.

(3) The lifting up of the Son of Man is presented as a "must." The word "must" means that Christ's crucifixion was necessary to: a) fulfill all the types and prophecies of the Old Testament (the divine "must" flows from God's eternal decree and the covenant of redemption made in eternity); b) make a perfect, sufficient provision for man's salvation from sin. If there was a way to save the elect from sin and guilt without the humiliation, suffering and bloody death of Jesus on the cross, then God would have saved man a different way. But only through the sacrificial death of the divine-human Mediator could sin, death and hell be vanquished. In Him and Him alone is life eternal.

Third, in both cases one must look at the object in order to be saved. In the case of the bronze serpent, there was nothing intrinsically powerful or saving about the snake that saved men. In that case, the looking was an expression of faith in what Jehovah had promised through Moses. They looked upon an image of the very serpent that bit them. In looking at Christ's suffering, bleeding and dying for sinners, we place our faith directly upon Him and His work of redemption. The object that Christians focus the eye of faith on is the divine-human Mediator, the sinless Lamb of God, made a sin and a curse for them. All the sins that are on our record that condemn us to the suffering of separation from God and hell are imputed to the Savior on the cross. The suffering and curse that He endured, He endured vicariously. That is, He was made a sin and curse for us. He endured the full penalty so that we would be totally free from God's curse against sin. Moreover, His perfect righteousness, obedience or merit is imputed to us as well. We obtain all this *not by doing* but *by looking*. The word "look" is used metaphorically for "have faith in" or "believe in." What this means is that men are saved solely by Christ and not by their own works, law-keeping, techniques or effort. The looking represents faith as that which lays hold of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Faith or belief does not save but only grasps Christ who does save. The Bible says "by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8).

True saving faith is *the instrument* that receives Jesus and His saving accomplishments. As J. C. Ryle explains,

Faith in the Lord Jesus is the very key of salvation. He that has it has life, and he that has it not has not life. Nothing whatever *beside* this faith is necessary to complete our justification; but nothing whatever, *except* this faith, will give us an interest in Christ. We may fast and mourn for sin, and do many things that are right, and use religious ordinances, and give all our goods to feed the poor, and yet remain unpardoned, and lose our souls.—But if we will only come to Christ as guilty sinners, and believe on Him, our sins will at once be forgiven, and our iniquities shall be entirely put away. Without faith there is no salvation; but through faith in Jesus the vilest sinner may be saved.¹

Whoever Believes...

The looking to Christ and the result of that looking are explained by Jesus in verse 15, “That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The looking is explicitly identified as believing. The connection between faith in Christ and eternal life is common in John’s writings. The word “believe” is used 98 times in this gospel. In chapters 1 and 2 it is used three times each. In this chapter it occurs seven times. Since believing (*pisteuō*) or having faith (*pistis*) in Christ is repeatedly presented in the New Testament as the only way to be saved, we need to carefully define what faith or belief in Jesus is. However, before we define saving faith, it will be helpful to look at some common misconceptions of the term. There are a number of dangerous distortions.

First, there is the heresy that defines faith as a subjective commitment or existential leap regardless of whether the teachings of the New Testament are actually true. This thinking is revealed in illustrations regarding faith being an irrational leap in the dark or a stepping into the unknown. Such irrational nonsense was popularized by liberal and neo-orthodox theologians who believed the Bible was full of errors, yet who held onto the biblical language of faith. They would argue that the resurrection of Jesus never really occurred but it becomes true to us when we embrace it in the realm of personal experience. This view is nothing more than rank unbelief dressed up with terms of religious piety that are subjectively defined.

It is ironic that the Christian view of faith is diametrically opposed to the liberal view. The Christian position is really the only rational position. Only the triune God of Scripture accounts for reality and meaning. The Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death is the only way to deal with sin and guilt. The Bible is the only religious book that is infallible, with zero contradictions, and is self-authenticating. To not believe in Christ is irrational. It is madness and rebellion. To reject Jesus and the Bible is to take an irrational leap of faith into the abyss of nihilism and despair. The one who believes in Christ and follows Him is like a man who built his house on solid rock. When the wind and floods of heresy, false worldviews and humanistic

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke and Co., [1865] 1975), 1:146.

philosophies beat upon this house, it stood fast on Christ, the way, the truth and the light (Mt. 7:24-25; Jn. 14:6).

Second, another deadly teaching is that faith itself is a work of man that replaces salvation through the works of the law. In other words, according to this system, men are not saved *through faith* as an instrument but *because* of their faith. This view is the logical outcome of Pelagianism and Arminianism. Arminian doctrine essentially holds that salvation is synergistic (i.e. a cooperative effort between God and man) and that belief in Christ is self-generated. It is an autonomous act of man and *not* a gift of God that comes as a result of regeneration. This teaching has led to the invitation system where men are told to accept Jesus into their hearts. Salvation is equated with finite man *allowing* Christ to save. This view is radically different from the teaching of our Lord and the apostles that men are dead in trespasses and sins and are dead and blind to spiritual truths (e.g., see Rom. 8:7-8; 1 Cor. 2:14). Faith is something that we must do, God does not believe for us; but we only believe because the Holy Spirit regenerated our dead hearts, opened our blind eyes and drew us to Jesus. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

Third, there are those who hold to what the Puritans called a mere historical faith. Such people may intellectually profess Christ and may even join themselves to the church for a season but their faith is not real. Their commitment is temporary. They are stony ground hearers (Lk. 8:13) or those who eventually disregard Jesus because of persecution and their love of the world (2 Tim. 4:10; 1 Jn. 2:15; 5:4). We read of such men in John 2:23-25: “Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.” These men said they believed in Christ because of the signs. They were excited about what they saw but their hearts were not changed by the Holy Spirit and they were never truly converted.

That there are spurious forms of faith no Christian will deny. But how can we identify true saving faith? There are a number of characteristics of genuine faith that we need to identify in ourselves.

First, true saving faith embraces *the whole Savior* as He is revealed in Scripture. If someone does not accept the full divinity or true humanity of Christ, then he has placed his faith in an idol of his own imagination. He clearly is not saved. Many religions say good things about Jesus, but they reject His divinity and thus are anti-Christian and heretical. If someone says he believes in Jesus as Savior but refuses to receive Him as Lord, then his faith is not genuine. We must believe and rely on *the whole Redeemer*. Jesus in His person is truly unique. If someone believes that the Lord had original sin or any actual sins, then he has rejected the faith. By now it ought to be obvious to us the importance of studying Scripture and learning everything we can about Christ. His person is absolutely essential and foundational to His work.

Second, it is crucial to believe that Jesus’s redemptive work *really saves*. There are many professing Christians who teach that our Lord’s work only makes salvation possible; that He does something that all men need, but that it is up to man himself to complete the process. This

type of thinking takes many forms. Roman Catholicism teaches that, on account of Jesus' work, grace is poured into a baptized person's heart and if that person cooperates with this grace and becomes good enough over time, then God will justify him. In other words, we are saved by faith and our own works. This teaching is rank heresy. A new doctrine, the Federal Vision heresy, is similar. It teaches that a person is justified when he believes in Jesus; but he is not eternally justified until God examines his good works on the day of judgment. If his good works or law-keeping were faithful enough, then God grants him eternal life. This teaching is a new form of Romanism. Perhaps the most sophisticated heresy which attributes salvation partly to Christ and partly to man is Arminianism or semi-Pelagianism. According to popular modern forms of Arminianism, Christ died for all men without exception but His blood, or death, actually saves no one unless men, of their own supposedly autonomous "free will," choose Jesus and consequently allow Him to save them. In this system the autonomous choice of man is more important to the saving process than Christ's own death and resurrection. The consistent Arminian would say that Jesus' work guarantees salvation of not one man. This system is not as crass as Romanism or the Federal Vision but it still denies the full efficacy of Christ's sacrificial death. Like the other systems, it is synergistic.

True faith embraces Christ as a true Savior who really, from beginning to end, saves His people from their sin. Genuine Christianity teaches that Jesus' life, death and resurrection are not only the foundation of a believer's justification before God (i.e. the Father's declaration that a believing sinner is righteous, based solely on Christ's righteousness), but also secures the application of that redemption to the elect sinner in time. In other words, union with Christ secures regeneration, effectual calling, definitive sanctification, progressive sanctification, perseverance and even glorification. Jesus does not make salvation possible, He secures salvation for His people.

Third, true faith is not temporary and it overcomes the world. When our Lord discusses true belief versus a counterfeit faith in His parable of the sower, He notes that the seed in good ground bears fruit with patience (cf. Lk. 8:15). True faith issues from a heart regenerated by the Holy Spirit. As John notes in his epistle, "You are of God little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4). "For whoever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (1 Jn. 5:4-5)? The faith that conquers the world flows from a heart that is born of the Spirit and is not a mere vague faith in the existence of God but a definite belief in the incarnation of the divine Son. The genuine faith that justifies connects us to Christ and all the other saving graces. Thus, although we boldly proclaim that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, this true faith does not remain alone but flows into a life of obedience that perseveres unto the end. Consequently, John writes of apostates, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us" (1 Jn. 2:19).

Fourth, true faith involves a trust or reliance upon Christ for salvation. A person who has saving faith accepts as true what the Bible says about Jesus and trusts in Him.

[F]aith consists in a fixed, unshaken trust and reliance upon him.... As we depend on his promise as a God that cannot lie, and give up ourselves to him as one who has a right over us; so we trust him as one in whom we can safely confide, and on whom we can lay the whole stress of our salvation. This act of faith is more frequently insisted on in Scripture than any other, it being a main ingredient in all other graces which accompany salvation, and there being nothing by which God is more glorified. It is not one single perfection of the divine nature which is the object of it; but everything which he has made known concerning himself, as conducive to our blessedness. We trust him with all we have, and for all we want or hope for. This implies a sense of our own insufficiency and nothingness, and a sense of his all sufficient fulness.²

Hodge writes, “By faith the Christian is said to be ‘persuaded of the promises;’ ‘to obtain them;’ ‘to embrace them;’ ‘to subdue kingdoms;’ ‘to work righteousness;’ ‘to stop the mouth of lions.’ Heb. xi. All this plainly presupposes that faith is not a bare intellectual conviction of the truth of truths revealed in the Scriptures, but that it includes a hearty embrace of and a confident reliance upon Christ, his meritorious work and his gracious promises.”³ John Gill notes that true faith is not a historical or temporary profession—a mere assent to certain propositions: “But such a faith, by which a man sees a glory, fulness, and suitableness in him as a Savior; goes to him, ventures on him, commits itself to him, lays hold on him, and receives him, leans and relies upon him, and trusts in him, and lives upon him; and which is the faith of God’s elect; a gift of his grace.”⁴

If you see your own desperate need of salvation because God has shown you your sin and guilt; that apart from Jesus in your situation is hopeless and as a result you flee to Christ and trust in Him alone for salvation, then you will be saved.

Eternal Life

The Jews who looked at the bronze serpent up on the pole had deadly poison in their system neutralized and thus received physical health or life. Those who look to the Savior up on the cross, dying, bleeding and suffering for sin, receive “eternal life.” The expression, “should not perish, but have eternal life” is deep and goes beyond physical death or life. To “perish” here refers to death associated with sin. This is eternal death or death in its fullest, most terrifying sense. To perish without Christ involves physical death, hell and the lake of fire.

When Jesus says that believers possess “eternal life,” He means much more than “to live forever.” Our Lord’s emphasis is not simply on duration or the fact that Christians will never die

² Thomas Ridgely, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton: Still Water Revival Books, [1855] 1993), 2:113.

³ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 207.

⁴ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 1:772.

the second death. It also speaks of the special quality of the spiritual life. To have eternal life is to be in Christ and possess life in the Spirit. It encompasses regeneration and the glorified life after the resurrection. It means that even though Christians die physically their souls go to be with Jesus in heaven. It removes man ultimately from all the effects of the fall and even takes him beyond where Adam was before he sinned. The eternal glorified life that believers will receive means that not only death but also even the possibility of sinning is forever removed. The salvation that Jesus obtained and gives us is remarkable and comprehensive. It is not merely a pardon of sins. It includes being reckoned perfectly righteous, the adoption into God's own family and being made a citizen of heaven. It involves not merely escaping hell, but also includes the title to heaven that Christ Himself earned. Although the expression "eternal life" is often used in the sense of a believer's future existence after death, John likes to emphasize that it is the present possession of the believer: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life" (Jn. 3:36). "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (Jn. 5:24; cf. 6:54; 1 Jn. 5:13).

The gospel is truly amazing—*anyone* (whether Jew or Gentile, slave nor free, man or woman, vile sinner or most wicked despicable of men) can be saved simply by looking to Christ. All that you need to do is look to Jesus with the eye of faith. The beauty and simplicity of the gospel often raises questions and doubts among those who hear it. A trembling sinner may reason in himself, "I do not have enough faith or my faith is too feeble to lay hold of Christ." To those who have a weak faith that is very feeble and imperfect, we can only point out that one's faith may be very feeble, yet the Christ it grasps is *infinitely powerful to save*. People have faith in different degrees. Some are strong while others possess a faith that is very weak. But each faith will possess Jesus and gain the victory. The person with a weak faith may lack assurance of salvation, but he is every bit as much a true Christian in possession of eternal life as the apostle Paul or Peter. The faith of a sinner will never be perfect, but the sinless life of Christ and His sacrificial death it lays hold of is *perfect*.

Remember that, as long as Peter looked to Christ, he effortlessly walked on the water but when he looked at his own feet and the waves about him, he began to sink. We need to understand what true faith is, but we must avoid focusing on our looking instead of focusing on Christ. As Pink points out,

In that great crowd of bitten Israelites of old there were some with young eyes and some with old eyes that looked at the serpent; there were some with clear vision and some with dim vision; there were some who had a full view of the serpent by reason of their nearness to the uplifted type of Christ; and there were, most probably, others who could scarcely see it because of their great distance from the pole, but the Divine record is "It shall come to pass, that *every one* that is bitten, when he *looketh* upon it, shall live." And so it is today. The Lord Jesus says, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He does not define the *method* or the *manner* of coming, and even if the poor sinner comes groping, stumbling, falling, yet if only he will "come" there is a warm welcome for him. So it is in our text: it is "whosoever

believeth” – nothing is said about the *strength* or the *intelligence* of the belief, for it is not the character or degree of faith that saves, but Christ Himself. Faith is simply the eye of the soul that looks off unto the Lord Jesus. Do not rest, then, on your faith, but on the Saviour Himself.⁵

God so Loved the World

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

This verse is probably the most popular, quoted and beloved verse in the entire Bible. The word “for” indicates that this verse explains verses 14 and 15. This verse tells us of the origin or source of salvation—God’s infinite love; and it explains the great object of God’s love—people who believe all over the world. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, probably believed that the Messiah and God’s salvation were a gift limited to the Jews—God’s chosen people. Here Jesus introduces Nicodemus to a doctrine that would be surprising and shocking to Jewish ears: God’s love expressed in the Savior’s redemption will extend to every corner of the world.

The words, “God so loved the world” are interpreted in two very different manners by commentators, even within Reformed circles. These views differ radically over the meaning of the verb “loved” (*agapaō*) as well as the object “world” (*kosmon*). Perhaps, the most common view, at least among modern commentators, is that the term “loved” refers only to “God’s general love of mankind.” In other words, love in this verse is not the special electing love that is only bestowed on Christ’s sheep, but rather is God’s pity, compassion or benevolence to the whole world of fallen men. J. C. Ryle writes, “The love spoken of is that love of pity and compassion with which God regards all His creatures, and especially regards mankind.”⁶ This apparently is Calvin’s view who says that “Christ brought life because the Heavenly Father loves the human race, and wishes that they would not perish.”⁷

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1945] 1975), 135.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:158.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 1:123. On the very next page, Calvin switches to a discussion of God’s special electing love: “But we ought to remember—what I have already stated—that the secret love with which the Heavenly Father loved *us in Himself* is higher than all other causes” (Ibid, 1:123-124). The teaching that God has a general love toward all mankind is common among Reformed commentators and theologians. Note the following comments. Preaching on Galatians 1:3-5 Calvin declares, “Although God demonstrates tokens of his love toward all mankind in general, the whole of Adam’s lineage has been cut off from him, until they are reunited through Jesus Christ. Thus, although the love of God is shown to all men by virtue of the fact that they were created in his own image, and although he causes the sun to shine upon all, provides food for all, and watches over all, yet this is nothing compared to that special love which he reserves for his elect, his flock” (*Sermons on Galatians*, Kathy Childress, trans. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997], 18). John Owen writes, “That God is good to all men, and bountiful, being a wise, powerful, liberal provider for the works of his hands, in and by innumerable dispensations and various communications of his goodness to them, and may in that regard be said to have a universal love for them all, is granted; but that God loveth all and every man alike, with *that eternal love which is the fountain of his giving Christ for them* and to them, and all good things with him, is not in the least intimated by any of those places in Scripture where they are expressed for whom Christ died, as elsewhere hath been abundantly manifested...” (*Works* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1957], 12:552. “He intended much good to all and every man in the world, and accordingly, in abundance of variety, accomplisheth that his intention towards

Those who hold to this interpretation naturally believe that the term world (*kosmon*) refers to the whole race of mankind (both the elect and non-elect) without any exception. In other words, God had pity on fallen humanity and consequently sent His Son into the world to provide a possible means of escape from sin and death. As Davenport writes, “His less special love is not restrained to outward and temporal mercies, but reacheth to internal and spiritual blessings, even such as will bring men to an internal blessedness, if their voluntary wickedness hinders not.”⁸ Heumann’s remark is even more specific: “It was not perceived that the Lord divided the world of which He speaks into two classes of men, namely, into such as on account of their unbelief would be lost, and those who would be saved by their faith; and teaches, that God has loved them both, and desires as much that one part of mankind should believe and be saved, as the other.”⁹

Some of the arguments in favor of this view are as follows:

(1) The fact that God loves all men without exception throughout the whole world and sincerely desires their salvation clears God of injustice in judging the world. This argument does not make any sense when we consider the fact that God’s attitude toward the non-elect is irrelevant as to the justness of their condemnation for sin. The Arminian takes this argument a step further and obligates God to give all men an unhindered will so that each man’s opportunity of choice regarding the Savior is equal. No. Men are responsible for their sin and their spiritual blindness.

(2) It is argued that there are a number of passages that support the interpretation that the word “world” means the whole of fallen humanity. For example, 1 Timothy 2:3-4 says, “For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Verse 4 continues the line of thought from verse 1 showing God’s attitude toward “all men.” The Greek here means “not all men without exception” but *all kinds or types of men*. As the Greek scholar George W. Knight notes, “As in v. 1 Paul means by the phrase all *kinds* of people, all sorts of people, including civil authorities (cf. for a similar

them,—to some in a greater, to some in a lesser measure, according as seems good to his infinite wisdom and pleasure, for which all things were created and made, (Rev. 4:11). And for that particular eminent good of salvation by Jesus Christ, for the praise of his glorious grace, we do not say that he intended that from eternity for a few, absolutely considered, for these will appear in the issue to be a great multitude, which no man can number (Rev. 7:9)” (Ibid). When Reformed writers speak of God’s general love, they refer to the fact that man’s image is a gift; that the external benefits that come from God (air, food, sunshine, beauty, etc.) are bestowed on the elect and non-elect; that God treats all men without exception with justice and equity; that the full deserved wrath of God against sin *is delayed* until a future time; and that the full effects of depravity upon mankind are restrained for the sake of the gathering of the elect in history. The Bible makes it clear that such undeserved benefits are temporary, external, non-saving and result in far greater wrath on the day of judgment. With these considerations in mind, it would be better to find a different word than love, which in modern ears means more than some temporary, external benefits. There is nothing in Scripture which indicates that God has a sincere internal desire to actually save the non-elect. Paul says, rather, that God hardens them (Rom. 9:18). “Where sin reigns, we shall find nothing but the wrath of God, which draws death along with it. It is mercy, therefore, that reconciles us to God, that he may likewise restore us to life” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 123).

⁸ Davenport as quoted in J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:160.

⁹ Heumann as quoted in E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, [1865] 1980), 1:184.

thought Tit. 3:1-7; note also Rom. 11:32, where the second ‘all’ embraces Jew and Gentile, but not every person).”¹⁰

Another popular passage is 2 Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance.” When Peter says that “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance,” who is he referring to when he says all? The word all is clearly restricted by the context to the pronoun *us*. Peter is clearly referring to believers, to Christians when he says “us” (2 Pet. 1:1). God is not willing that any of *us* (that is, Christians) should perish, but that all of *us* (God’s people) should come to repentance. If Peter had meant that God is not willing that any person in the whole world will perish, then this passage would teach universal salvation, for the Bible teaches that God does have the power to carry out His will. “No one can take II Pet. 3:9 to support the Arminian position without wrestling it out of context, misapplying it to the reprobate, and breaking basic rules for the interpretation of plain English or Greek. Peter’s position there, as everywhere else, is that *Christ died for us* (the elect) and not for the whole world [i.e. all men in the world without exception].”¹¹

Another favorite text is 1 John 2:2: “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for the whole world.” The apostle John was a Jew writing to Jewish believers. John is saying that Christ is the propitiation not only for the sins of the Jews, but also for the whole world—the Gentiles also. This interpretation is preferable for a number of reasons. First, note the striking similarity between this passage and John 11:51, 52: “Jesus would die for the nation [Israel], and not for that nation [Israel] only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad [i.e. the elect in every nation—the world].” Caiaphas, under divine inspiration, contrasts Israel and the world. It was common for Jews in ancient rabbinic literature to use the terms “world” and “Gentiles” as synonymous. Note how the apostle Paul uses “world” and “Gentiles” in a parallel manner: “Now if their fall is riches for the *world*, and their failure riches for the *Gentiles*...” (Rom. 11:12). Second, John uses the word “propitiation,” a word which means that God’s wrath against the sinner is appeased and removed. If John means that Christ is a propitiation for all men without exception, even for those in hell, then this passage would teach a universal salvation. If one prefers to translate the Greek word as “expiation” instead of “propitiation,” the passage would still teach universalism. Expiation means that the guilt of sin is removed. If the guilt of sin is removed from everyone, then why would God punish anyone? Third, “If Christ is a propitiation for *everybody* it would be idle tautology to say, first, ‘He is the propitiation for *our* sins and *also* for everybody.’ There would be no ‘also’ if He is the propitiation for the entire human family. Had the apostle meant to affirm that Christ *is* a universal propitiation, he would have omitted the first clause of v. 2, and said, ‘He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.’”¹²

¹⁰ George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 119.

¹¹ Duane Edwards Spencer, *TULIP: The Five Points of Calvinism in the Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 40.

¹² Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*, 260.

(3) If the term “world” is used exclusively of the elect throughout the world, then the distinction between “world” in 16a and those who believe in 16b is lost. As Ryle notes, “If the ‘world’ means only the believing portion of mankind, it would have been quite enough to say, ‘God so loved the world, that he gave His only-begotten Son, that the whole world would not perish.’ But our Lord does not say so. He says, ‘that whosoever believeth: i.e., that whosoever out of the world believeth.’”¹³ This argument is the most convincing but is overly simplistic. The focus of the term “world” in John 3:16 is on fallen man in its international aspect, as opposed to the Jews only. God special love is directed to people all over the world, yet in time these people must come to faith in Christ. The term “world” lets us know that God’s saving love extends to all nations of the earth, the expression “whoever believes” tells us how the gift of Christ is obtained, that salvation is not universal but limited to believers.

Love for the Elect throughout the World

The other Reformed view which is held by many eminent theologians and commentators (e.g., John Gill, George Hutcheson, Lampe and Arthur W. Pink) is that the love described in John 3:16 is God’s special, saving love. (The old terminology for God’s electing love is the love of approbation or complaisance.) Once this love is identified as a love that elects and saves man through Christ, the term “world” is identified as fallen man in its international aspect who are actually loved by God: that is, the elect those who truly believe. George Hutcheson writes,

The object loved, which is, “the world,” whereby we are not to understand all and every man, (for that were to make God be disappointed of his will, and of what he intends toward man out of his love, saying all get not good of Christ, and to have him giving Christ for them for whom he will not sanctify himself for intercede, John, xvii. 9, 19,) but only his own in the world among lost mankind, who are not only gathered from among all nations and conditions of men in the world, and not of the Jews only, (as “the world” is taken, 1 John, ii. 2; see John, xi. 51, 52; Rom. iii. 29) and who (as there is a community or world of the reprobates as distinguished from the elect, John, xvii. 9, so they) make up a world or community of themselves, 2 Cor. v. 19; John, vi. 33; but they are by nature the same that others of the world are, of the same race of cursed mankind, and not only living in the world, but after the fashions of the world; and herein shine at the matchless love of God, that he would not so far abandon lost mankind but he would have a new and holy community to himself from among them, and would love those who had nothing lovable in themselves more than they who were left in their miserable estate.¹⁴

¹³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:158.

¹⁴ George Hutcheson, *John* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1657] 1972), 47. Before one assumes that the term “world” means every single human being in the world without exception, one should carefully examine how the word “world” (*kosmos*) is used in Scripture. The term “world” has a variety of meanings in the New Testament. The best way to determine the meaning in each passage is to examine the context and other passages that have a similar usage. A clear passage can shed light on a less clear passage.

There are at least eight different uses of the term “world” in the New Testament. 1. The word can refer to the entire created order—the universe. “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth...” (Ac. 17:24). 2. It can refer to the earth itself. “Jesus...loved His own who were in the world” (Jn. 13:1;

This interpretation of “love” and “world” is to be preferred for the following reasons. First, the love of God spoken of is God’s love that sends Christ to actually save sinners. If we survey the New Testament, the love of God that sends Christ is always described as special and saving. In our Lord’s high priestly prayer, Jesus is concerned only with God’s electing love: “For their sakes [i.e. those whom the Father has chosen out of the world; not the whole world of fallen mankind; cf. Jn. 17:6-10] I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth... I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (Jn. 17:19, 23). Note how Paul repeatedly connects God’s love and the sending of His Son directly with the atoning death of Christ for His sheep: “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-7). Paul speaks of God’s love as having definite individual persons for its objects. It is a love that saves to the uttermost. A love of mankind in general that does not necessitate the salvation of any particular person, that leaves people in their sins, is not a love rich in mercy. It is not His great love which redeemed us from sin.

Like Jesus and Paul, John, in his first epistle, connects the love of God directly to Christ’s sacrificial death. The purpose of God sending His Son is that we should have life in Him. “In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the

cf. Eph. 1:4). 3. “World” can mean the evil world system (cf. Jn. 12:31; 1 Jn. 5:19). 4. Sometimes *kosmos* refers to the whole human race (except Jesus Christ). After spending two and a half chapters proving that all men without exception are sinners, Paul says “all the world” is guilty before God (Rom. 3:19). 5. Sometimes world refers only to unbelievers. The devil is called the “deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12:9). John says that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 Jn. 5:19). Christians are not under Satan’s power. Revelation 13:13 says that “all the world...followed the beast,” yet Christians do not follow the beast or receive his mark (Rev. 14:9-10). When Jesus told His disciples: “the world hates you” (Jn. 15:18), He obviously was referring only to unbelievers. 6. The term “world” can also be used to describe the Roman Empire or what was considered the civilized world in the days of the apostles. “A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Lk. 2:1). When Paul wrote to the church at Rome and said, “your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (1:8), most of the earth had not heard the gospel and knew nothing about the Roman church (cf. Ac. 2:5; Col. 1:23; Ac. 19:27; Gen. 41:57). 7. “World” is also used as a synonym for the Gentiles. “Now if their [i.e. the Jews] fall is riches for the *world*, and their failure riches for the *Gentiles*, how much more their fullness?” (Rom. 11:12; cf. v. 15, 32). 8. Sometimes the word “world” refers to the elect or those who come to saving faith throughout the world. Note Paul’s words, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). God does not reconcile men in general, nor does God reconcile men hypothetically, if they do their part. The expression “not imputing their trespasses unto them” can only refer to Christ’s sheep, the elect, or true believers. This passage *cannot* mean that God has reconciled every single individual in the world to Himself, for it cannot be said of individuals who do not believe and go to hell that God has not imputed their trespasses to them. People without sin do not go to hell. Since the word “world” can be used in so many different ways in Scripture, one should be very careful to study the context in each case before jumping to a conclusion which contradicts other plain teachings in Scripture.

world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent to His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved if God so loved us, we ought to love one another” (1 Jn. 4:9-11). God’s love resulted in the Son’s incarnation, His sinless life and His sacrificial death. On the cross He propitiated the righteous wrath of His Father against sin. God’s love involved the Son suffering the full penalty of sin in our place so that we would not have to suffer it. He bore our sins in His own body on the cross and by His stripes we are healed. This is what the love of God involves. Let us not water down the love of God to sound inclusive or to please Arminians. Let us fully honor Christ “who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood” (Rev. 1:5). “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19).

The passages that speak of Christian “love” to unbelievers (that is, love as pity, compassion; a lawful, equitable, just or fair treatment of unbelievers and enemies; a turning of the other cheek; a going the extra mile; etc.) must *never* be confused with the passages that speak of God’s love that sends His Son to save sinners. God’s special love reaches out and fully redeems the elect in Christ. “There are dimensions to the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of His wondrous love, that none can measure.”¹⁵ “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you” (Jer. 31:3). “I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

Second, those who argue that a special saving love is not intended in John 3:16 must explain how God *gives* his Son to the non-elect. In John 3:16 the original literally says, “that His Son, the only begotten, He gave.” “All the emphasis is on the astounding greatness of the gift; hence, in this clause the object precedes the verb. The verb *he gave* must be taken in the sense of *he gave unto death as an offering for sin* (cf. 15:13; 1 John 3:16; especially 1 John 4:10...).”¹⁶ As Paul says, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things” (Rom. 8:31-32). The Son of God was not given for those who never believe and are never saved. Those who do not hold to the biblical doctrine of a particular or limited atonement cannot explain how Jesus is a gift to the non-elect. A hypothetical gift that does not save is no real gift at all. Remember, that the gift of Christ on the cross not only removes sin and guilt but also secures the application of redemption (regeneration, effectual calling and the impartation of faith) as well.

Those who hold to the view of a general love of mankind come exceptionally close to Amyraldianism in their interpretation. Note how J. C. Ryle deals with Christ as God’s love gift, “The expression, ‘He gave,’ is a remarkable one. Christ is God the Father’s gift to a lost and sinful world. He was given generally to be the Savior, the Redeemer, the Friend of sinners,—to make an atonement sufficient for all,—and to provide a redemption large enough for all.”¹⁷ No good Calvinist would deny that Jesus’s death is sufficient for all. That is not the point. Christ’s

¹⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 1:137.

¹⁶ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 1:141.

¹⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:160.

life, death and resurrection secure the salvation of the elect *only*. The gift of Christ includes: expiation, reconciliation, justification, propitiation, redemption, and glorification. “Christ...gave Himself for our sin; that He might deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). “Christ...loved the church, and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). “I am the good Shepherd, the good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep...I lay down My life for the sheep...I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (Jn. 10:11, 15, 28). B. B. Warfield writes, “The Calvinist is he who holds with full consciousness that God the Lord, in his saving operations, deals not generally with mankind at large, but particularly with the individuals who are actually saved. Thus, and thus only, he contends, can either the supernaturalism of salvation which is the mark of Christianity at large and which ascribes all salvation to God, or the immediacy of the operations of saving grace which is the mark of evangelicalism and which ascribes salvation to the direct working of God upon the soul, come to its rights and have justice accorded to it.”¹⁸ The Christ that God gives dies, intercedes, mediates and bestows the Holy Spirit.

Third, the Bible clearly teaches that God does not love every individual in the world. “Did God love Pharaoh? (Rom. 9:17). Did He love the Amalekites? (Ex. 17:14). Did He love the Canaanites, whom He commanded to be exterminated without mercy? (Dt. 20:16). Did He love the Ammonites and Moabites whom He commanded not to be received into the congregation forever? (Dt. 23:3). Does He love the workers of iniquity? (Ps. 5:5). Does He love the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction, which He endures with much long-suffering? (Rom. 9:22). Did He love Esau? (Rom. 9:13).”¹⁹ It is true that God bestows a kind of general undeserved favor upon mankind in that He gives everyone air to breathe, water to drink and provides mankind with crops, rain and sunshine. These benefits, however, are not spiritual, are temporary and only increase the wrath on an unbeliever at the day of judgment. One could also argue that Christ’s redemptive work has benefited mankind in a general and *indirect* manner. The rise of Western

¹⁸ B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 87. J. C. Ryle, an excellent scholar and expositor, saves what he thinks is his best argument for last, which is his understanding of John 6:32. He writes, “He Himself says to the wicked Jews, ‘My Father *giveth you* the true bread from heaven’ (John 6:32). This last text, be it noted, was one with which Erskine silenced the General Assembly in Scotland, when he was accused of offering Christ too freely to sinners” (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:161). Here Jesus contrasts Himself with the manna in the wilderness. The Father gives the real bread out of heaven. The real bread is Jesus, the Antitype. The context indicates how the real bread is given. Our Lord identifies Himself as the bread of life. He says that He is the one who both imparts and sustains life. He is the source of spiritual-everlasting life. This salvation is given to the world (i.e. both Jews and Gentiles). The “world” here does not include all fallen men in the world without exception, for Christ does not *bestow* “life” on every descendent of Adam. “It is not said that the true Bread *offereth* ‘life unto the world,’ but He ‘giveth life.’ It is the ‘world’ of believers who are here in view. The Lord, then, designedly employs a word that reached beyond the limits of Israel, and took in elect Gentiles too” (Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 1:325). That Jesus is not giving the Jews a dissertation on the general love of God or how God “desires” every person in the world to believe, is exploded by our Lord’s words in the immediate context: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall be taught by God.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me” (Jn. 6:44-45). Moreover, it is clear from verses 53-58 that Jesus, the bread of life, is only really given to those who eat (i.e. those who believe in Him).

¹⁹ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1932] 1979), 293.

Christian culture and the scientific, political and economic progress that has flowed from a biblical worldview has helped untold millions of people around the world. But these benefits are not spiritual or lasting. They are short lived and only help condemn men on the day of judgment. These general non-saving benefits do not come near to explaining the infinite love behind Christ's death.

Does the Bible teach that it is God's desire to save all men? No, not at all! God did not choose or elect all men to eternal life. He only chose some; the rest are hardened (Rom. 9:18). These are vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (2 Thess. 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 2:8-9; Prov. 16:4; 1 Thess. 5:9). God is infinite in power, knowledge and wisdom. If God really was trying to save every individual throughout history, then why did He restrict His special revelation to a tiny nation in Palestine under the Old Covenant? Why did God forbid Paul, Timothy, and Silas to preach the gospel in Asia (Ac. 16:6)? Why does the Bible repeatedly say that God hides the truth from many people (Mt. 11:25; Isa. 6:9-10)? Why did Jesus Christ not pray and intercede for all men, but only for some (Jn. 17:9)? Christ encouraged Paul to preach in Corinth saying, "for I have many people in this city" (Ac. 18:10). In Acts 9, Jesus Christ appears to Paul and turns a zealous persecutor of Christians into the greatest evangelist the world has ever known. Why doesn't God raise up thousands of apostle Pauls to spread the gospel throughout the earth? God certainly has the power to do so, but He does not. Regeneration is a sovereign act of God, yet God refuses to regenerate all men. Faith and repentance are gifts of God, yet God only grants these gifts to some and not others. The Bible clearly teaches that God is not trying to save all men. What it does teach is that He will save some people out of every nation before Christ returns (Rev. 5:9).

Fourth, the phrase "that whosoever believes" restrains the universal nature of the term "world." It shows that Christ only died for those who believe in Him; that the gift of Jesus and His redemption are only to those who have faith. Only believers possess Christ; have union with Him and feast on His saving benefits. The Father's provision to guilt-ridden, dying men was His only begotten Son. Only those who are regenerated by the Spirit and feast on the bread from heaven are given life and heaven.

The Purpose or Design of God's Love

The purpose of God's love is "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." This part of the verse explains once again what it means to look to Christ and repeats for emphasis verse 15. Jesus essentially says, "Note well once again the absolute necessity of faith as the instrument that possesses salvation." It is faith and faith alone that takes hold of the atoning death of the Son of Man. This verse indicates that the great dividing line between mankind throughout the whole earth is what people believe regarding Christ. The gospel is to be preached throughout the entire world and only those who place their trust in Jesus receive eternal life, the rest perish. The simplicity of this message and the effortless way that our Lord's saving benefits are procured is astounding. There are no good works involved or

techniques or works of penance. One must see oneself as a guilty sinner, as justly condemned by a holy law, as under God's curse. Having seen oneself under condemnation with the world, one must look to Christ as *the only Mediator* between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24); *the only remedy* for sin and guilt. If you do not think that you are a sinner; or you think that you can appease God with apologies and good works, or if you are convinced that following certain religious rituals will open the gates of heaven, then you are most certainly lost.

Many people today look to science, or the government, or self-achievement, or to Buddha, Mohammed, the virgin Mary or Krishna as their prophet or savior. Such people will suffer eternal death in the Lake of fire. Jesus Himself repeatedly tells us that salvation is through *Christ alone*, obtained by *faith alone*. "Faith alone' is a confession that all which is necessary for our acceptance with God has been done by God Himself in His redemptive act in Jesus Christ. It is an acknowledgment that Christ Himself, in our name and on our behalf, met all our obligations before the bar of eternal justice."²⁰

Since we have already discussed the nature of true faith at length, by way of review we should consider some common illustrations that help us understand the instrumental and appropriating nature of faith. Faith has been compared to an empty vessel which holds a priceless treasure or an empty ring of base metal that holds a very large priceless diamond. These illustrations emphasize that faith is not what saves; belief is not a foundation of salvation but it lays hold of Jesus Christ who does save. All the faith in the world will do nothing unless it possesses the Christ of Scripture. Some Puritans have spoken of faith as the hand of the soul. As Toplady writes, "Nothing in my hand I bring; only to the cross I cling." Faith is also spoken of as an eye which looks away from itself toward Jesus Christ and His finished work. True faith is always directed to Jesus. True faith always acknowledges that we have nothing to contribute to our salvation; that all our righteousness is as filthy rags; that apart from Christ we are hopeless, destitute, dead and damned.

The statement of verse 15 that those who believe should not perish but have everlasting life is repeated. Those who trust in Christ are no longer under a divine condemnation that is complete and everlasting, that reaches its culmination at the final judgment. They, rather, are given eternal life and will live with God in glory forever. Your eternal destiny rests upon your view of Jesus of Nazareth. Our Lord is telling Nicodemus to completely reassess his whole understanding of religion. The Pharisees divided mankind into the saved and the condemned largely on the basis of ethnicity, heritage or circumcision. The world was divided between the Jews and the Gentiles or between the strict law-abiding Jews and everyone else. Christ unfolds to Nicodemus the true basis of judgment. It will not be between Jews and Gentiles but between believers and unbelievers. Whatever nationality a person is, God commands all men everywhere to repent (Ac. 17:30). Wherever in the world you were born, the most important thing in your whole life is "What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He?" (Mt. 22:42). Jesus sets perishing and life eternal starkly over against each other as a warning to you to look to Him for salvation now.

²⁰ Robert D. Brinsmead, "The Radical Meaning of Sola Fide," *Present Truth* (June, 1975), 6.

Look to Jesus dying and bleeding for sinners and you will possess life in the fullest sense possible.

The Purpose of the Incarnation

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (Jn. 3:17).

Jesus continues on His explanation of God's love as it relates to the Savior's redemption by correcting Nicodemus' false understanding of the Messiah's mission. The Jews in the days of our Lord viewed the Messiah as coming to execute a judgment of condemnation on a sinful world. They ignored the passages about the suffering servant who would die to expiate the sin of His people (e.g. see Isa. 53:2-11; Ps. 22:1-18; etc.) and focused their attention on the prophecies of the Savior's exaltation. David spoke of the Messiah breaking the nations with a rod of iron and dashing them to pieces like a potter's vessel (Ps. 2:9). In Daniel, the Son of Man is given a kingdom that crushes previous kingdoms and conquers the world (Dan. 7:9-22). Nicodemus, like most Jews, not only restricted God's special love to the Jewish people, but also viewed the Messiah's first advent as a search and destroy mission on behalf of the Jews.

Our Lord corrects these popular views by explaining that the Messiah's first coming (His incarnation) was not to judge or condemn the world but to redeem it. As He says in John 12:47, "I came not to judge the world, but to save the world." "The Greek word for judging and condemning, it must be remembered, is one and the same. Judgment and the condemnation of the ungodly, our Lord would have us know, are not the work of the first advent, but of the second."²¹ Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he needs to greatly broaden or enlarge his concept of God's love. When one looks at this fallen world, one would expect God to crush humanity in His wrath. The heathen nations outside of Israel were in a much worse state than even the corrupt Jews. Outside of Israel and the small Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire, the knowledge of the true and living God of Scripture was virtually nonexistent. Men throughout the earth practiced the basest forms of idolatry. The religions that men came up with were blasphemous and savage. Human sacrifice and sexual perversions of every kind were common. Immorality and violence filled the earth. If we read the second half of Romans chapter 1, we see that the slide of humanity into idolatry and perversion was universal, deep and abiding. Anyone familiar with Jehovah's holy and righteous character can only marvel that God did not sweep mankind off the face of the earth with a wave of fire and brimstone.

But no, His great love of His people would not permit it. Instead of raining fire and brimstone on a world of gross sin and iniquity, He sends His only begotten Son. Instead of judgment and wrath, He sends the amazing love gift of His Son. To understand the depth of this love, you must keep in mind that the Father freely gave His only begotten Son up to be hated, despised, rejected, mocked, spit upon, condemned as a vile criminal, publicly humiliated,

²¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:162.

tortured, crucified and placed in a tomb. Instead of sending a curse upon the world, He sent a curse upon His Son so that all of God's people would be saved. He was "delivered for our offenses" (Rom. 4:25); "God spared Him not, but delivered Him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32).

We must never forget that our Lord's first coming was one of supreme humility. He deliberately did not allow the power of His divinity to shine forth except on rare occasions before His disciples. When He was berated and insulted by His enemies, He calmly refuted His opponents using Scripture and reason. When He was falsely accused of many things by the Jews, He opened not His mouth (Isa. 53:7). He was like a sheep led to the slaughter. When He was asked to act as a judge and settle disputes, He adamantly refused (Lk. 12:14). Jesus, in His first advent, came to die on the cross as a vicarious sacrifice for His people. From the moment He was born, His whole life was directed to the cross. When Jesus was rudely rejected by a village of Samaritans, His disciples James and John said, "'Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?' But He turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them'" (Lk. 9:54-56).

The Bible is very clear that, after the resurrection, Jesus is glorified Lord over all and that, when He returns a second time, He will sit on His white lustrous throne of glory and judge all men who ever lived. But His first advent was a coming in love and mercy to save a people from their sins. Let us all look to Jesus as the Savior, the love gift of God the Father, so that when He comes again we will not face wrath in judgment. Meditate on the love of God and the supreme act of love—Jesus' death on the cross—and place all your faith in Him. And if you ever have doubts, keep looking to Christ. As Calvin observes, "There is now no reason why any man should be in a state of hesitation, or of distressing anxiety, as to the manner in which he may escape death, when we believe that it was the purpose of God that Christ should deliver us from it...and whenever our sins press us—whenever Satan would drive us to despair—we ought to hold out this shield that God is unwilling that we should be overwhelmed with everlasting destruction, because he has appointed his Son to be salvation of the *world*."²²

No Condemnation

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

²² John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 126. Some people who read the statement that through Him the world "might be saved" may misunderstand what is being said to the effect that the salvation of the world is uncertain. In common English usage, a person may say "I might do such and such" which means he may *not* do it as well. An Arminian could seize on the word "might" as signifying a contingency. That God sent His Son to save the world, but men must exercise their free will if salvation is to occur. The word might—as part of the verb—as it is used in the New Testament does not express uncertainty or only a possibility but rather expresses design. "When we are told that God sent His Son into the world that through Him 'the world might be saved,' it signifies that 'through him the world *should* be saved,' and that is how it is rendered in the R.V. For other instances we refer the reader to 1 Pet. 3:18—'might bring us to God' implies no uncertainty whatever, but tells us of the object to be accomplished. For further examples see Gal. 4:5; Titus 2:14; II Pet. 1:4, etc., etc." (Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 1:138).

In this verse Jesus speaks in the singular to make His point about the importance of faith very personal. Our Lord divides all those who hear the gospel message into two groups, each of which is represented by one individual. Once again, Christ is emphasizing that faith in Him or a lack of faith in Him is what divides humanity into the saved and the lost. He states the same truth in both a positive and negative form so that we cannot miss His point.

The first person believes in Christ and is not condemned. As Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus...” (Rom. 8:1). Our Lord uses the present tense. The man who trusts in Christ has eternal life; he has passed from death into life. He is declared righteous by God in heaven because he possesses by faith Christ’s work of redemption. Jesus was condemned, suffered and died in the believer’s place. Even though the believer is still a sinner and in himself does not possess a perfect righteousness that meets God’s approval, the Father can declare him righteous because the Savior endured the full curse of the law and lived a perfect sinless life for him. God cannot render a verdict of condemnation on the believer because the Redeemer was condemned on the cross.

This is the third time our Lord has spoken on the absolute necessity of faith, belief or trust as that which grasps His redemptive work. “It shows the immense importance of faith in the sinner’s justification. It is that one thing, without which eternal life cannot be had.... Faith, and faith only, gives an interest in Christ. The old sentence of Luther’s days is perfectly true,...and startling as it may sound: ‘The faith which justifies is not the faith which includes charity [or acts of love], but the faith which lays hold on Christ.’”²³ If you see your own guilt and helplessness before God, then the only way to be pardoned, acquitted, justified, cleared from all guilt, delivered from the curse of the law, reckoned perfectly righteous and given a title to eternal life that can never be taken away is simply to believe in Christ. The present tense “is not condemned” means that a believer’s justification is a present possession that reaches out all the way to the final judgment. Jesus removes all of our sins: past, present and future. As Paul says, “By Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Ac. 13:39).

Although Jesus repeatedly emphasizes faith in His own person and work as essential for salvation, much of modern evangelicalism has radically distorted the presentation of the gospel in a humanistic direction. Because they have adopted Arminian theology, which holds that Christ’s sacrificial death did not actually secure the salvation of anyone, that an autonomous act of man’s “free will” is decisive (i.e. the most important factor in redemption is man’s choice), they emphasize the sovereignty of man in salvation. Thus, when a typical modern evangelical is asked why he has a title to eternal life, he does not speak about Christ’s doing and dying as a substitute for His people or about God declaring sinners righteous on the basis of Christ’s work, but rather he will say, “I know I am saved because I accepted Jesus as my personal savior” or “I let Jesus come into my heart.” The gospel is reduced from the objective work of Christ sovereignly bestowed by God upon the elect to sovereign man letting Christ subjectively dwell in

²³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:163.

his heart. “God ‘has to’ do what we require. Not surprisingly, this view leads to a pragmatic concept of salvation: ‘what’s in it for me?’ What does God have to offer, as against the world? God and Satan are reduced to bidders for man’s favor, with man as sovereign, so that God is made into a tempter, trying to bribe man into salvation with enticing offers and pleadings.”²⁴

The expressions “accept Christ as your personal savior” and “let Christ come into your heart” are not found in Scripture and were never used by Christ, the apostles or the evangelists. In Revelation 3:20 Christ said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” This passage is sometimes used to justify the expression “let Christ come into your heart.” The context of the passage, however, clearly indicates that Christ was speaking not to unbelievers, but to a backslidden church. Christ, therefore, is not saying “let Me come into your heart,” but “hear and obey and reestablish proper fellowship.” Christ is coming in to fellowship with His saint. He is not standing at the door of the spiritually dead sinner asking him to exercise his unrenewed will.

Another passage used to justify modern evangelical methods is John 1:12: “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.” What does it mean to receive Christ? If one studies the gospel of John, does one find Christ and the apostles inviting people to receive Jesus into their heart? In the gospel of John, receiving Christ is synonymous with believing in Christ. Jesus said, “I have come in My Father’s name and you do not receive Me... For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (Jn. 5:43, 46-47). The only way to receive Christ is to believe in Him. To receive Christ is to believe the words which He speaks and the scriptural testimony regarding Him. Believing in Christ means trusting Christ’s person, character, work and word. One believes that Christ can carry out His promises. He can save to the uttermost. Receiving Christ is not a formula in which man sovereignly controls the Lord of lords and King of kings; but, rather, is a wholehearted trust in the divine-human mediator Jesus Christ. While in the gospel of John people are never exhorted to receive Christ as their personal savior, the verb *pisteuo* (to believe) occurs 98 times. In evangelism, the Holy Spirit’s emphasis should be our emphasis. There is nothing wrong with the phrase “receive Christ,” as long as it is biblically defined.

The shift in modern evangelical preaching and evangelism from justification by faith alone to the terminology of inviting Jesus Christ into the heart or accepting Jesus as personal Savior has led many Protestants down the road toward Rome and the Christian existentialism of the Charismatic movement. The Bible emphasizes that Christ’s work of redemption for His people is *objective*. It takes place *outside* the sinner. When a person believes in Christ, he is declared righteous by God the Father in the heavenly court. This also takes place *outside* the sinner. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the *result* of justification and not the cause of it. Thus, the terminology of inviting Christ into the heart really has nothing to do with justification.²⁵ The

²⁴ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, 274.

²⁵ There has also been a tendency among evangelicals to ignore justification and emphasize the new birth. People are often asked, “Have you been born again?” That question would be legitimate if evangelicals defined the new birth biblically. It would be the same as asking, “Has the Holy Spirit changed your heart, enabling you to repent and

indwelling of Christ's Spirit is not what justifies. The work of the Holy Spirit in man is that of sanctification. Although many evangelicals probably do not intend to confound justification with sanctification in their evangelism, their sloppy biblical terminology does not differentiate between an imputed righteousness and an infused righteousness. Christ's objective work *for* His people is confused with His work *in* His people. This is the great error of Romanism.

The second person is the one who rejects Christ and the gospel. He does *not* believe in Jesus as God's only begotten Son and thus is already under the condemnation of God. The unbeliever, even while he lives, is in a state of judicial condemnation before God. His record is one of daily, continuous violations of Jehovah's holy law in thought, word and deed. He is guilty and damned while he walks the earth and is only a heartbeat away from hell. As long as a man remains in unbelief: he abides in darkness; is a servant of the devil; and a mountain of guilt covers his soul. Everyone naturally born of Adam is born with the curse of a sin-hating God upon him. He is by nature "a child of wrath" (Eph. 2:3). The horrifying judgment of the final day when Jesus returns is determined by the guilt already accumulated in the present life. Unbelievers walk about with a terrible curse upon them. Without faith in Christ they are already citizens of hell. "The past tense of the verb, is condemned already, ...was used by him emphatically, ...to express more strongly that all unbelievers are utterly ruined."²⁶

The second part of verse 18 gives the reason for the condemnation which comes in the form of a legal indictment: "because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." The guilt is solemnly expressed. The guilt of not believing in Jesus is incredibly great because it involves a rejection of such a glorious Savior who is God's own Son. It involves counting the work of the cross as worthless. It is the height of wickedness to disregard such a blessed, glorious sacrifice. To trample the cross of Christ underfoot is an insult to God who sent Jesus and an insult to Christ who came to do such an amazing work. J. C. Ryle's observations on this verse are noteworthy. He writes,

This sentence is justly thought to prove that no sin is so great, and so damning and ruinous to the soul, as unbelief. In one sense it is the only unpardonable sin [the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit excepted]. All other sins may be forgiven, however many and great, and a man may stand complete before God. But if a man will not believe on Christ, there is no hope for him; and if he persists in his unbelief he cannot be saved. Nothing is so provoking and offensive to God as to refuse the glorious salvation He has provided at so mighty a cost, by the death of His only begotten Son. Nothing is so suicidal on the part of man as to turn away from the only remedy which can heal his soul. Other sins may be scarlet, filthy, and abominable. But not to believe on Christ is to bar the door in our own way, and to cut off ourselves entirely from heaven. It has been truly remarked that it was a greater sin in Judas Iscariot not to believe on Christ for pardon, after he had betrayed Him, than to betray Him into the hands of His enemies. To betray Him no doubt was an act of enormous covetousness, wickedness, and ingratitude. But

believe in Jesus Christ?" Evangelicals, however, do not define the new birth biblically. Their question basically means: "Have you accepted Christ into your heart and had a wonderful spiritual experience?" The focus is not on the objective work of Christ, but on man's autonomous decision and the inward experience it produces.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 127.

not to seek Him afterwards by faith for pardon, was to disbelieve His mercy, love, and power to save.²⁷

In the United States where most people possess a Bible and have frequently heard about Christ and His death and resurrection, the vast majority of people have rejected Jesus and the gospel for secular humanism and hedonism. The fact that our country was once largely Christian, but has turned its back on the Savior and the Bible, is a great condemning sin. The just condemnation for breaking God's law is aggravated tenfold with the guilt of spurning God's remedy for sin—His only begotten Son. People and nations that reject one so kind, loving, merciful, holy, righteous and excellent as the Mediator are deserving of great judgment. The rejection of God's blessed Son is not a light thing. It is the sin of sins which merits the vengeance of God. If you look to Christ as He is revealed in Scripture you will be saved to the uttermost, but if you reject Jesus you will face Him personally as a judge and executioner on the final day. Listen carefully to Paul's warning, "...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty Angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

Why the Light Is Rejected

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into this world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (Jn. 3:19-20).

These verses explain *why* those who reject Jesus are under God's verdict of condemnation. The cause of men's condemnation is their rejection of the light. This verse refers primarily to the generation of Jews who were alive at our Lord's incarnation. Jesus uses the perfect tense: the light "has come." The light that came into the world at Bethlehem is now here and the light continues to shine. The expression "light" is rich and multifaceted in meaning. As the light, our Lord is the source of all truth and life. He came to reveal to man the spiritual light and truth and this light is the source of all spiritual life. The term "light" is also used to describe God's ethical perfection (1 Jn. 1:5). When Christ came into the world, He spoke the truth openly, lived the truth perfectly and demonstrated the truth beyond a reasonable doubt through His many miracles. The gospel went forth openly and shined among men. Was there anything deficient in the light that warranted man's rejection of it? No, certainly not! The enemies of Christ could only condemn Him and His teaching by blatantly lying against Him. Was there anything deficient about God's love, the gospel, or Jesus' atoning death that warranted the widespread rejection of these things by men? No. Men have no excuse logically, intellectually or spiritually for rejecting the Son of God. What then is the problem?

²⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:164.

Jesus tells us that the cause of unbelief in the face of undisputed truth, love and evidence is man's own wickedness. Men love the darkness and, therefore, hate the light. Only man's moral and spiritual depravity can explain why anyone could reject the sinless, impeccable Son of God, who is love, truth and light. This observation not only explains why God's judgment against all Christ rejecters is just and necessary but also explains the utter madness of unbelief. "It is not only that men are *in* the dark, but they *love* the darkness—they prefer ignorance, error, superstition, to the light of truth. And the reason why they love the darkness and hate the light is because their deeds are evil."²⁸ Those who love the darkness are condemned to darkness and those who despise the light are excluded from the light. They suffered eternal separation from Christ and God because they hate God and want nothing to do with His only begotten Son. Anyone who thinks that God's judgment against sin and unbelief is too harsh or severe reveals his ignorance of Scripture and reality. Men who reject Christ for the darkness have only themselves to blame.

Our Lord adds a secondary reason that the wicked want to conceal their sins. Men loved darkness and thus their lives are characterized by works of darkness. Their habits of life are gross, immoral, and lawless and that is the way they want their lives to remain. The gospel of Jesus Christ requires all of us to face our sins, acknowledge them and forsake them. It requires that we see our life apart from the Savior as God sees it: wicked, hurtful, damnable and destructive. Embracing Jesus as Savior is an act of humility; for by doing so we admit that we have been rebels against God and that without Christ we are doomed to destruction. Those who reject Jesus are full of pride. They would rather stick fast to their own expression of human autonomy and continue on their own dark corrupt way than admit the truth of the gospel and repent. Their love of sin causes them to choose sides against Christ. The Pharisees were corrupt hypocrites who would rather kill the author of life than admit their wickedness. In our day secular humanists oppose the Savior with every fiber of their being because their worldview and ethics are corrupt and futile. Because men love darkness and cling to works of darkness, they will reap the fruit of their own ways. They loved darkness and hated the light and thus will be cast into outer darkness. People think that the doctrine of hell is unfair and harsh. But it is only logical that people who hate the light will be shut out from light eternally. "In short, lost souls will be what they willed to be, and will have what they loved."²⁹

Our Lord's teaching on the gospel is deep and penetrating. He tells us that there is no excuse for unbelief. People make up all sorts of excuses as to why they will not embrace Christ and become a Christian but all these excuses boil down to the fact that men are evil and thus do not want to come to Jesus and bow before Him. Such people need a work of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts called the new birth. This work causes men to hate their sin and to love Jesus so they look to Him alone for salvation (see Jn. 3:3-8). No one can love Christ until they are born from above and drawn to the Savior by the Spirit. Those who cling to Christ by faith demonstrate that

²⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 1:138.

²⁹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 1:166.

they are the elect of God. Those who choose anything other than Jesus reveal that they are fit only for destruction.

As we contemplate these words we must exercise caution, for they apply not only to obvious heathen who clearly love a life of sin and openly hate the true religion. They also apply to people who seem very religious and pious but substitute a false religion for Christ or play the hypocrite. There are many unconverted persons who call themselves Christians and attend church. They outwardly seem to have a love of the light but inwardly and secretly they love and follow the darkness. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were considered the most pious of men, but in reality they hated God and clung only to the outward form of religion. Those to whom the gospel comes today, who do not really want to come to Jesus, will often forge a counterfeit Christianity that makes man the sovereign in salvation. This can mean salvation through works or by one's autonomous free will or some version of the carnal Christian heresy. Tragically, in America today, Christ is often preached as an add-on to life to make it more satisfying and fulfilling. The gospel is presented in the language of pop psychology as the ultimate in self-realization and hedonism. People are told that if they accept Jesus they will have better cars, bigger houses and fatter wallets. The law of God, the sinfulness of sin, the holiness of Jehovah and the necessity of repentance are all passed over to make easy converts to fill large church buildings. The gospel has deliberately been watered down and molded so people's sinful behavior is not exposed because people do not want their sins brought to light. People go to church and are happy but they do not possess Christ and are still in darkness. But when our hearts are changed by the Holy Spirit, we love the light. Regenerated hearts will always come to Christ and forsake the darkness. If you have not come to the Savior and bowed the knee to Him, then your heart is evil.

The Converted Man

But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God (Jn. 3:21).

Jesus concludes his discourse with Nicodemus by discussing a believer's response to the light. The man who does the truth comes to the light. The verb "to come" is in the perfect tense and indicates a person whose heart has been changed by the Holy Spirit believes in Christ and continues to believe in Jesus throughout life. Since a casual surface reading of this verse is liable to misunderstanding, we need to carefully analyze its meaning. Some could read this verse as teaching that men who are *naturally* good, who are upright or moral in character are those who come to Christ. Such a view would not only explicitly contradict Scripture, which teaches that apart from a work of the Spirit all men are dead in trespasses and sins and are unable to do anything that is spiritually good (cf. Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Jer. 13:23; 17:9; Ezek. 11:19; 16:4-6; 36:26; Mt. 15:19; Jn. 8:43-44, 47; Rom. 5:6, 13; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:1-5); but also explicitly contradicts Jesus' own teachings. Our Lord said, "No one is good, but One, that is, God" (Lk. 18:19); "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (Jn.

6:44). Since our Lord obviously is not teaching the inherent goodness of some men or salvation by good works that leads to faith, what is He saying?

Given the fact that the discourse began with the necessity of the new birth before a man can see or perceive the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3-10), Jesus has in mind the renewed man who habitually performs actions in accord with truth (the Word of God). Such a person habitually relies on Christ and is happy to have his deeds exposed to the light of Scripture. The person that is born again, places his deeds under the scrutiny of God's law and continually flees to the Savior. "Perhaps we could bring out his meaning by saying that the truth elsewhere in the New Testament by the doctrine of election underlies this verse. It is only the men on whom God has laid His hand who can truly say his works are 'wrought in God.' And he will not avoid the light."³⁰ Jesus wants us to know that the good deeds of a believer, though by no means perfect, were nevertheless done with God's approval. The regenerate person seeks to obey the law with the right motive and does so under the forgiving blood of Christ. The implication of Jesus' statement is that Nicodemus should immediately leave the realm of darkness and unbelief and should embrace Christ by faith, the true light.

Summary and Conclusion

In this amazing section of Scripture, Jesus lays out a number of key doctrines that are of utmost importance. (1) The only way to be saved from sin, death and hell is to believe in Jesus Christ as He is revealed in Scripture. (2) Christ and all His saving merits are obtained *solely* by faith. (3) The love of God is the reason that Jesus was sent into the world to suffer and die for sinners. (4) The first coming of Christ was not to judge and condemn the world but to save the world. (5) Everyone who believes in Jesus is immediately delivered from condemnation. Everyone who rejects the Savior already lives with God's condemnation upon them. (6) People do not embrace the Redeemer because they love darkness (evil, sin, human autonomy) and hate the light (Jesus, God, the truth). (7) People are unwilling to come to Christ because they do not want their wicked behavior exposed and do not want to repent of their sin. (8) The renewed man lives the truth and continuously relies on Jesus for salvation. He knows that his deeds have been done out of gratitude for salvation and, because his works flow out of faith in Christ and are done to glorify God, he is not afraid to have them exposed.

This whole discourse with Nicodemus (Jn. 3:2-21) is so rich theologically that one could argue that it contains the whole gospel message in a nutshell. In this short conversation, we hear about the redemptive work of all the persons of the Trinity: the Father's love that gives; the Son's atoning death on the cross; the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration upon man's heart. Jesus tells us about the corruption of man's nature, the nature and necessity of the new birth, His sacrificial death on Calvary, the necessity and nature of saving faith, the reason that men reject Christ and their just condemnation by God; and the true marks of the man who embraces the

³⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 235.

Savior. Among all the historical narratives in Scripture, there is not found a fuller salvation sermon than this. Virtually every crucial doctrine is considered.

This precious sermon from the lips of the Redeemer raises some questions that you need to consider. Are you looking to Christ dying and bleeding on the cross for sin with the eye of faith? Have you rejected the gospel because you love your sins and thus despise the biblical message? Are you forgiven and declared righteous by God because you believe in Christ or are you living under the wrath of God? The most important question you will ever face is: Do you believe in Jesus? Trust in Christ and you will be saved. If you reject Jesus, you deserve to go to hell.

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