

## **Earthly Things and Heavenly Things**

John 3:11-21

Do you love Christmas?

I am not asking if you love all the consumerism attached to Christmas. But do you love Christmas?

Do you love the story of God sending his most beloved and only begotten Son into a world of darkness?

I know that we ought not to separate the birth of Christ from the rest of his life and ministry, but there is something truly beautiful about God sending his Son into the womb of Mary to enter this world of sin as a helpless infant.

Emanuel – God with us!

Without this incredibly sacrificial act of the Father, there would be no hope of salvation.

God is so wonderfully good. I hope that you know that.

I hope that you see in this gift of God a love and a beauty that is greater than anything else we find in this world.

As we look at John 3 again today, my hope and prayer is that you will find great delight in God's gift to the world.

Read John 3:11-21

We will spend most of our time thinking about John 3:16, but it is important to place this verse in its surrounding context. My hope is always two-fold, I want you to have truths you can chew on and apply in your life, but I also want you to go away from here today having known this portion of Scripture better.

It is as you know the Word and believe it in your heart that you grow in holiness.

11 Truly, truly, I say to you,  
we speak of what we know,  
and bear witness to what we have seen,  
but you do not receive our testimony.

Movement from a conversation into a discourse.

“We” – Why does Jesus use the plural here?

- Jesus is responding in kind with Nicodemus’ earlier statement in 3:2. (We know you are a teacher...)
- Royal plural = actually is a subtle way of referring to himself as God. (Trinity)
  - Seems to be the only possible answer since Jesus is the only one having seen heavenly realities.
  - Jesus has just been speaking of the heavenly birth. He can speak with authority on this because he speaks of what he can actually see.

But Nicodemus does not believe – at least not yet. (And maybe Jesus is speaking generally)

Why not?

- likely answer is that Nicodemus cannot see these realities himself or that they are just too difficult to understand.
- But this is not the answer that Jesus will give.

12            If I have told you earthly things  
                 and you do not believe,  
                 how can you believe  
                 if I tell you heavenly things?

What are the earthly things that Jesus has been speaking about?

- The things about humans being born from above.
- This may appear to be spiritual and heavenly, but it occurs in people on the earth.

What are the heavenly things then?

- The realities of the eternal life to come.
- Eternal life is really beyond our current ability to grasp.

13            No one has ascended into heaven  
                 except him who descended from heaven,  
                 the Son of Man.

Jesus is explaining where he has come from and who he is:

- I came from heaven
- I am the Son of Man

What does “ascended into heaven” refer to?

- Is Jesus referring to his future resurrection and ascension into heaven?
- Or, is he referring to some other ascension that has already occurred?
  - he does us the past tense.
- I have come to believe that Jesus is not talking about any specific ascension that he has performed. Jesus is basically saying that no human has ever ascended into heaven “to know what it is like and who is allowed to enter there”. But that he, having his origin in heaven, has come down from heaven - so he does know what it is like and who is allowed to enter there.

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

Jesus explains that there is a similarity between his own life and death and what occurred in the OT during the days of Moses. After being brought out of slavery to the Egyptians, many of the Israelites began to complain and grumble. They were impatient and frustrated with God. So God sends fiery serpents that bite many of the people.

Listen to what happens in

**Numbers 21:7-9** <sup>7</sup> And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

God could have removed the plague without any bronze serpent on a pole. But he uses this means to better help us to understand the work of Christ.

Moses lifted up the serpent. People looked to the serpent. They were freed from the plague.

Jesus too must be lifted up on a tree (cross), and people who look to him "may have eternal life."

It is important to note that the Israelites took what was helpful as a sign and turned it into an idol.

King Hezekiah will many years later have to deal with this idolatry.

**2 Kings 18:4** <sup>4</sup> He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in

pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it (it was called Nehushtan).

The simple fact is that it is the life, death and resurrection of Christ that produces salvation. Jesus was lifted up on the cross, and we are to continue to lift up Jesus Christ in our preaching. It is only as men and women, boys and girls, look to Jesus Christ that eternal life is given.

“The kingdom of God is seen or entered, new birth is experienced, and eternal life begins, through the saving cross-work of Christ, received by faith.” Carson

Now to v. 16.

16           For God so loved the world,  
                  that he gave his only Son,  
                  that whoever believes in him  
                  should not perish  
                  but have eternal life.

Some Bibles have the words of Jesus printed in red. I think that this is very helpful. But there are a few places where we are not entirely certain if Jesus is speaking or someone else. Vv. 16-21 is one of those places. Chapter 3 began with a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. But by verse 11, Jesus seems to move into a sort of discourse. But at some point along the way,

and scholars are not in agreement as to exactly where, Jesus' discourse seems to give way to John the Apostle's reflections. I tell you this so that you will be aware of it. In my estimation it does not alter the meaning in the least, nor is it disingenuous that John does not inform us of the change. In one sense, it is entirely appropriate that what is taught in vv. 16-21 should be considered as truth coming from the Lord.

This is one of the most well-known verses in Scripture. In some ways, I do not need to comment on it at all. You get the point. But like most well-known Scriptures, it is easy to think you understand them, and not really get all that there is to get in them.

Typical understanding: Everyone means sooo much to God that he gave Jesus so that WE can be free from God's judgment and go to heaven. Anyone who tells Jesus, "I believe" gets this free gift of eternal life.

I am not going to tell you that this is wrong. It is not. But without the fuller picture of Scripture, and this passage it is easy to get some things a bit out of wack.

We will look at each of the three phrases separately:

For God so loved the world

The emphasis of this statement is on the intensity of God's love for the world. What makes this love intense and so amazing is

not the sweetness of the world – the world must really be special for God to love them so much, like we might think about a baby kitten.

God's love is so powerful and so amazing because it is directed towards people with wicked hearts who are currently in rebellion to him. "God so loved wicked and fallen people who are rightly under his condemnation."

When we hear this verse, it is not our own specialness that should come to mind, but the greatness of God's love. We ought to be thinking, "How can you possibly love me? You should NOT love me! I deserve only hatred from you."

And neither is God's love great because the world is vast. Americans love big, but it is not that the world is so big – as if God's love is great because he loves 10 billion people!

This is not John's point. He is most likely making the point that Jesus did not come to love only Jews. He came to provide salvation for Gentiles as well. God sent Jesus to save Russians and Chinese and Muslims and Brazilians. We cannot set any limits to whom Jesus will save. Jesus came to save drug addicts and prostitutes and liars and cheats.

But this verse should not be taken so as to deny those texts of scripture which clearly teach that God's most amazing love is poured out upon his elect. Many try to defend from this verse



that God loves every person equally. They would believe that there is not one bit of difference between God's love for Abraham and his love for Pharaoh. God loved them equally. This is only fair. The only reason for Abraham's being saved is that he exercised his "free will" to believe God and Pharaoh did not.

If this is what you understand from this verse, I want to challenge you to think again. All of Scripture teaches the wonder of God's electing love, but John will glory in this love repeatedly throughout his gospel. It is good and right to believe that God's loves all people. But the depth of the love that God has poured out upon his elect, which results in being born again and issues in true faith and repentance and growth in holiness far surpasses the love that God extends to those who will ultimately spend eternity in hell. When God chooses to pour out saving love upon a person, He chooses to overcome the unbelief that currently dominates them.

When you understand God's love as being equal to all people, then you render that love powerless to save.

But as much as I believe that God predestines and pours out special love upon those he has chosen to save, I do not believe that we should try to make the word "world" mean "elect" either. The point is not, "God so loved his elect..."

It is absolutely biblical for us, as Presbyterians, when we share the gospel, to tell the unbeliever that God loves them and that Jesus came to save sinners – just like them. We do not have to wonder if a person is elect before we can tell them God loves them and wants them to be saved. God calls us to proclaim the good news to all men.

Look at the next phrase:

that he gave his one and only Son

God is a father, but he is not first or foremost “your” father. His fatherhood is first directed towards his one and only Son. We cannot overestimate the intensity of the affection that the Father feels for his one and only Son. There is nothing that means more to the Father than his beloved Son. If we quickly pass over this relationship so that we can get to our being saved, we belittle the gospel and how great of a sacrifice it was to the Father to give his Son.

When people malign God as being indifferent to their sorrows, they mock what they do not understand. God knows the pain of giving his one and only and perfectly beloved Son. If you will only dwell on how much it took for the Father to give his Son, you will never again doubt that he will graciously give you everything else for your salvation as well.

that whoever believes in him...

should not perish  
but have eternal life.

This is a wonderful and amazing promise that we should give to everyone that will hear. The way to salvation is through believing in Jesus.

Whoever believes in Jesus will not perish, but have eternal life.

But once again, we ought not to take Scripture out of its context. When we do we inevitably begin to push it farther than it ought to be pushed.

First, people often make the assumption that because this promise is given that it necessarily follows that all people have the power within themselves to believe.

This is not the case. Jesus commands: **Matthew 5:48** <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Would any of us assume that Jesus is teaching that it is within our human ability to be perfect? Hardly.

No man will be perfect until glory and when that perfection comes, we will all know that it has been brought about by the grace of God alone. What Jesus is saying is that every follower of God should strive, by the help that God gives, to be perfect.

In a similar way, we are told that “whoever believes will have eternal life.” This promise is true and wonderful since how terrible would it be for someone to truly believe and yet God still turns them down and bars them from eternal life. Jesus encourages us, “If you believe, you will be saved.”

The other way that this verse is used to teach what is unscriptural, has to do with the nature of true belief. It is very easy to attach our preconceived understanding of “believe”, rather than use the rest of Scripture to determine its meaning.

For instance, should not Jesus’ words in **Matthew 16:24-25** inform our understanding of true belief: <sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

How can we say that we believe “in him”, if we do not believe and respond appropriately to what he explicitly says? And yet the hard fact is that many people claim to believe in Jesus and have an expectation of eternal life, and yet have no real determination to deny themselves.

This should not be. We should allow one text of Scripture to inform our understanding of other texts of Scripture. We do not have to go to Matthew either. Should we not allow what Jesus has just taught Nicodemus to inform our understanding of

what he is saying here? Should we not make an attempt to understand “true belief” in terms of being “born from above”? And although we may not grasp the mysteries of being born of the Spirit, surely we can agree that if a person has been born of the Spirit that this work will bear fruit of a changed life.

The idea that a person can believe in Jesus Christ while remaining relatively unchanged in their lifestyle is not anywhere taught in Scripture. And yet, too many claim to have faith in Jesus while living in sin. Belief in Jesus Christ, by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, results in a changed life. Any faith that does not lead to change is a dead faith that does not save.

But again, as we try to confront the errors of “easy believism”, we do not want to fall down the other side of the ridge of truth. The fact is this: You do not have to clean up your life before you come to Jesus. We come to Jesus as sinners in need of grace. Jesus’ death purchases redemption for all who believe in him. Salvation comes to us from above. It is the merit of the death of Jesus Christ that we believe in. We are looking away from ourselves and to the righteousness of another to bring about our redemption.

Jesus alone has earned the grace that we need.

We are entirely depending upon Jesus to procure our forgiveness before a holy God.

We are entirely depending upon Jesus to produce the new life that will result in a hunger for righteousness.

And Jesus does not drive away those who come to him. All who truly look to Jesus will indeed find salvation.

17           For God did not send his Son into the world  
                  to condemn the world,  
                  but in order that the world might be saved  
                  through him.

Jesus is not denying that there will be a future judgment that will bring condemnation on some.  
Nor is he saying that He will not ever condemn anyone himself.

The point is that his current coming into the world was not for condemnation. If that were the case then he would be destroying all that is evil.

No, his first coming was a coming for the purpose of saving. Many of the OT prophecies mix elements of a suffering Messiah with a reigning and conquering Messiah. But without a separation of these elements into two separate “comings”, no man could be saved. The second person could have come the first time to condemn, but then there would be no one saved. Praise God that he came the first time as a humble servant to bear the punishment of all who would believe.

18           Whoever believes in him is not condemned,  
                  but whoever does not believe is condemned already,  
                  because he has not believed

in the name of the only Son of God.

All men stand under God's condemning wrath already. Jesus' coming does not initiate their condemnation. All mankind lives daily under the holy wrath of God.

But a refusal to believe in Jesus will further aggravate their condition.

Because belief in the name of the only Son of God is the only way to be freed from God's wrath, to reject Jesus is to seal one under the condemnation of God.

Remember v. 11 – “you do not believe our testimony”.

Remember how we speculated as to why people do not believe?

We are now going to get the answer: Here is the judgment of Jesus of people's unbelief:

19           And this is the judgment:  
                  the light has come into the world,  
                  and people loved the darkness rather than the  
          light  
                                  because their deeds were evil.

There is the answer for unbelief – it is a moral problem, not an intellectual problem.

People love the darkness.

People commit evil actions revealing that they love evil more than light, more than holiness.

Jesus is pure light. You cannot believe in Jesus without loving light, for he is light.

Here is the reason why men do not have the power to believe within themselves. True belief requires some love of light. Therefore, it is our love of that which is evil that prevents belief. It is not that believing is so difficult in itself – like climbing Mount Everest or swimming across the ocean. The difficulty is within our heart. Jesus explicitly says that his yoke is easy. The reason that it does not always feel easy is that we continue to love ourselves more than God.

Do not underestimate the darkness of the human heart. Jesus did not. He knew what was in man. This is why that Jesus, and the Spirit, and the Father counseled to come up with the glorious plan to transform the hearts of all those the Father had given to the Son. This is why salvation can only come through the New Birth. This is why salvation comes to us from above. This is why salvation can only be a reality as we are united to Jesus Christ.

20           For everyone who does wicked things  
                  hates the light  
                  and does not come to the light,  
                  lest his deeds should be exposed.



You cannot come to Jesus without having your evil deeds exposed. If you think you have come to Jesus and have believed in him, yet you are not hating sin and loving the light, then you have not truly come to Jesus.

One of the first signs of true life from above is that we no longer try to conceal the darkness of our own heart. I am not saying that we need to publish all of our sin to the world, but we do begin to confess freely to God our rebellion and we also begin to confess to one another.

Let me give you an easy illustration of this:

- Before Christ: one makes excuse after excuse why he or she does not read and study God's Word.
- After Christ: one is willing to acknowledge that the primary reason for not digging deeply into God's Word is that the treasures of this life are more appealing than the Word.

Humanism teaches us that we are basically good. The problems that we face are primarily external to us. We need a better job, a better church, a better family, a better ... you name it. The Gospel has a different perspective. It does not minimize the problems that are external to you – not in the least. But it also very clearly explains that the primary problem that we all have is that we love evil.

21            But whoever does what is true

comes to the light,  
so that it may be clearly seen  
that his deeds have been carried out  
in God.

Look closely at v. 21.

We have just been told that we do not believe because we love evil.

Now we are told that there are those who do “what is true”. That means that they must be lovers of light. You cannot come into the light without loving the light.

Does this mean that some people naturally love the light – that they are naturally good?

Of course not – if this were so, then what would be the point of Jesus coming to save?

The answer is in the short phrase “in God”.

The person who comes to Jesus – also loves the light and does what is true. But he does so “in God”. In other words, it is the life of God flowing in him or her that enables one to do good deeds.

They are never done in their old nature, which is not united to God.

If you believe in Jesus and are learning to deny yourself and walk in obedience to God’s commands and live a life of love to

God and your neighbor, then there is only one explanation: The life of God is living in you.

Jesus, as the only true source of light, when he brings a sin-darkened soul into his presence, enlightens that soul.

**Galatians 6:7-8** <sup>7</sup> Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. <sup>8</sup> For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

**Philippians 2:12-13** <sup>12</sup> Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

If you are working out your salvation, it is only because God is working in you to will and to work for his good pleasure.

No man is good, truly good, apart from Christ who is the light. And for someone to claim to be good apart from Christ is a terrible sin.

There times where God enables even unbelievers to have a measure of goodness. I believe he does this to expose even further the evil of their hearts. Because they claim to possess

that goodness apart from the only source of true light – Jesus Christ.

So, God has loved a fallen world.

He has sent his most beloved Son to save sinners.

Whoever believes in Jesus, truly believes, will receive eternal life.

What have you done with these truths?

Are you believing?

Or when you think about Jesus and what he has done, do you find yourself disinterested?

You see, every day you make a judgment as to whether or not Jesus is worth your pursuing.

Every day you judge whether or not living in the light is more desirable than living in the darkness.

But what many do not understand is that Jesus is not the one on trial.

When a person chooses to reject Jesus, he is saying far more about himself than he is about Christ.

And I want to close with an illustration that I found reading a sermon by John MacArthur.

When we choose to love the world more than Jesus, we are like...

“the guy visiting the famous museum in France, the Louvre. After walking throughout the museum and viewing all the beautiful paintings, he walked out and said to the curator, "I don't think so much of your pictures."

And the curator says to him, "Sir, these pictures aren't on trial, you are."

I can just envision when men and women stand before God on that final day trying to explain why they were not more enamored with the beauty of God's salvation in Christ.

Their lack of seeing beauty in Christ does not diminish his beauty, it only reveals the darkness of their own souls.

And those of us who do find ourselves exalting in Christ, please recognize that you only do so “in God”.

Amen.