

**The Gospel of John (18);
“Jesus, the Brazen Serpent, and Saving Faith” (part 1)**

Introduction:

Over the past four Sundays we have addressed the interchange between our Lord Jesus and Nicodemus regarding the new birth, or commonly known as regeneration. Regeneration is the great event experienced by everyone who becomes a true Christian. It is a creative, life-imparting act of God whereby He causes a spiritually dead sinner to become spiritually alive, which is then seen in the sinner’s repentance from sin and turning to God, in his faith in Jesus Christ, and in his transformed thinking, feeling, and acting, in that he becomes a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, joining himself to his brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ in the church.

Last Lord’s Day we stated that there is a subtle shift in the narrative beginning with John 3:11. The narrative transitions from a dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus to a straight monologue of the Lord Jesus. There is also a transition from the subject of the new birth to the subject of faith in God, who had sent Jesus into the world to save sinners from death and damnation. And so, even though verses 11 and following are a continuation of our Lord’s conversation, it is fitting to change the title of our sermon from “**Jesus, Nicodemus, and the New Birth**”, to “**Jesus, the Brazen Serpent, and Saving Faith.**”

Let us turn to read **John 3:9-17**.

⁹Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

¹⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?”

¹¹Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

The Lord Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that though he was a very religious, very educated, and very highly regarded teacher in Israel, he would never enter the kingdom of God unless he was born again. This new birth involved his being washed of the guilt and pollution of his sin and being given new, spiritual life by the Holy Spirit.

The Lord Jesus made it quite clear to Nicodemus that this new birth that was absolutely essential in order to have everlasting life in the kingdom of God, that regeneration was due wholly and solely to the sovereign grace of God wrought by the Holy Spirit. It must be, for human beings are incapable of knowing God yet alone relating to God, for that which is born of flesh is flesh (v. 6a). Sinners must be born again of the spirit in order to be truly spiritual, “for that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v. 6b). And in verse 13 Jesus declared to Nicodemus that only He was qualified to speak of this matter and only He could bring a sinner to experience it. And so, in verse 13 we read that

I. Jesus is alone qualified to save sinners (3:13)

Beginning with **verse 13** the Lord Jesus spoke of His unique qualification to be the Savior of sinners. He declared, “*No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.*”

Our Lord first declared, “No one has ascended to heaven.” Our Lord was probably alluding to a passage from Proverbs 30.

The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, his utterance. This man declared to Ithiel—to Ithiel and Ucal:

²Surely I am more stupid than any man,
And do not have the understanding of a man.

³I neither learned wisdom
Nor have knowledge of the Holy One.

⁴***Who has ascended into heaven***, or descended?
Who has gathered the wind in His fists?
Who has bound the waters in a garment?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is His name, and what is His Son’s name,
If you know? (Prov. 30:1-4)

These are the words of Agur who was lamenting his own lack of wisdom, his ignorance in understanding the ways of God. It was not as though he was more ignorant than others; rather, he knew that no human being could have true wisdom, for God alone is wise. He asks the rhetorical question, “***Who has ascended into heaven***, or descended?” Who has gone up to heaven and learned from God and then return to live according to the wisdom he acquired there? Of course he was stating that no one had ever done so; no one had ever ascended to the Lord. The Lord Jesus was telling Nicodemus that no man could acquire the wisdom that God alone possesses; no one has ascended into heaven so as to come to know Him and live before Him.

But though no one had ever ascended into heaven, Jesus declared that He had come down from heaven. Again, we read, “No one has ascended to heaven ***but He who came down from heaven***.” Here the Lord declared His preincarnate deity. He had been in heaven, but then He “came down.” His coming down speaks of the incarnation, when the eternal second Person of the Blessed Holy Trinity, took upon Himself our human nature, and thereby being eternal God, He also became a man.

Jesus now makes it clear that He can speak authoritatively about things in heaven, though no one else can. No man has ever ascended into heaven. But He has come down from there. Throughout the Gospel John insists on Jesus’ heavenly origin. This is one way in which he brings out his point that Jesus is the Christ. Here the heavenly origin marks Jesus off from the rest of mankind. Men are, as Paul puts it, “of the earth, earthly” (1 Cor. 15:47). But He is from heaven. Men cannot raise themselves to heaven and penetrate divine mysteries. It was part of the sin of the “son of the morning” (the devil) that he said in his heart, “I will ascend into heaven” (Isa. 14:12f). But he could not do it. It remained a boast and an ambition. Jesus, however, really has been in heaven and He has brought heavenly realities to earth.¹

The reason that Jesus announced this truth to Nicodemus was to show him His credentials for teaching both earthly and heavenly things. Nicodemus could neither understand earthly nor heavenly things, for he had never ascended to heaven. “The authority that belongs to Jesus, and authority that gives Him the right to speak of ‘earthly’ and ‘heavenly’ things, is an authority rooted in His heavenly origin.”²

Again, here Jesus declared His incarnation, in that He “came down from heaven”, that is, He assumed a human nature, and thus He became God and Man in one person. Jesus Christ alone could reveal the true God to mankind and enable them to know God. **Matthew Henry** wrote of this verse:

¹ Leon Morris, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 222f.

² Edward W. Klink, III, **John**. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 202.

Our Lord Jesus, and he alone, was fit to reveal to us a doctrine thus certain, thus sublime: *No man hath ascended up into heaven but he* (v. 13). *First*, none but Christ was able to reveal to us the will of God for our salvation. Nicodemus addressed Christ as a prophet; but he must know that he is greater than all the Old-Testament prophets, for none of them *had ascended into heaven*. They wrote by divine inspiration, and not of their own knowledge (see 1:18). Moses ascended into the mount, but not into heaven. No man hath attained to the certain knowledge of God and heavenly things as Christ has (see Matt. 11:27). It is not for us to send to heaven for instructions; we must wait to receive what instructions Heaven will send to us (see Prov. 30:4; Deut. 30:12).³

Here in verse 13 Jesus referred to himself as “*the Son of Man*.” When we see this self-designation of our Lord, the Son of Man, in the Synoptic Gospels, it is Jesus commonly referring to Himself as the promised Messiah. However, when we see the “Son of Man” used in the Gospel of John, it is commonly used to emphasize our Lord’s human nature. And so here we have set before us both the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. He is the incarnate Son of God.

Take note of the clause that is in our NKJV of verse 13. It reads, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man *who is in heaven*.” This relative clause is not in the newer translations of the Bible. It is in the KJV and the NKJV. The oldest manuscript that contained this clause dates to about the 5th century. But apart from that one manuscript, most of the manuscripts that contain this reading date from the 9th c. and later. The editors of one of the most respected modern Greek texts rate their selection of variants (different readings from different manuscripts) on how confident they were in either including or excluding a reading, to the degree they believed it reflected what was most likely in the original document. An “A” rating means that they are certain the reading they chose to include in their Greek text was likely in the original writing. “B” readings mean that they were fairly convinced they chose the correct original reading. “C” ratings indicates they were not certain, but that their choice was likely correct. And a “D” reading means that they were not very confident they chose the reading that was in the original document. They gave this clause in verse 13 a “C” rating. They were not absolutely confident that this clause was originally penned by John, so they chose not to include it in their Greek text. This is why the translators of the newer translations chose not to include this clause in their English translations.⁴

However, even though this clause was probably not original to John’s Gospel, nevertheless, it is a true statement. Even while Jesus was speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus was one person with two natures, both divine and human. In His human nature He stood before Nicodemus. But His divine nature was not restricted or limited to the human body of Jesus only. In His divine nature Jesus is the Son of God. His divine nature is spirit, which is ever present in fullness everywhere. Although God may choose to manifest Himself in one place more than another place, we should never think that God is actually more present in one place than another. God is everywhere, and He is in His fullness everywhere. Even when Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus, and His human nature was there only, His divine nature filled all in all. Now that Jesus Christ is enthroned in heaven, His divine nature is with us everywhere and anywhere, but in His human nature, which includes His human soul and body, Jesus is enthroned in heaven.

II. Jesus and the Brazen Serpent (3:14, 15)

With **verses 14 and 15** the Lord Jesus draws the attention of Nicodemus to a great illustration from the Hebrew Scriptures that set forth the manner in which He brings salvation to His people. In doing so, Jesus set before Nicodemus the need for His own crucifixion in order to save sinners. Nicodemus was probably as most Jews. He thought that when the Messiah came, He would do so in great power and glory, to be favored by all, universally acclaimed as King, bringing God’s blessing upon His people that they had forfeited through their sin. But Jesus showed Nicodemus that He must suffer and die, being put to an open shame,

³ Matthew Henry, **Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible**, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 886.

⁴ The ESV, NIV, NASV, and RSV do not translate this phrase in their translations.

being hung as one cursed of God hanging from a tree (cross). Jesus must have bewildered Nicodemus with these words:

¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

It was as though Jesus said to him, “Are you expecting Me to take to myself power and to restore the kingdom to Israel? Cast away such vain expectation. I have come to do a very different work. I have come to suffer, and to offer up myself as a sacrifice for sin.”⁵

Our Lord was referring to the account recorded in **Numbers 21:4-9**, in which God first judged His people for their sin and then He saved his people from His judgment. Here is the account:

⁴Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.” ⁶So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.

⁷Therefore 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.

⁸Then the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

There are many comparisons to be made between this event and what God provides for His people through Jesus Christ.

1. First, we see *the portrayal of sin* in this event in Numbers 21. ***These poisonous serpents or snakes were both the result of sin as well as emblems of sin itself.*** God has declared in His Word,

Behold, all souls are Mine;
The soul of the father
As well as the soul of the son is Mine;
The soul who sins shall die. (Ezek. 18:4)

The just wages for a life lived in sin is death. “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). And so, just as these Israelites were dying because of their sin, all mankind is dying due to sin. There is a sense in which outside of Christ every person is spiritually dead. But it is also true that every person outside of Jesus Christ is dying or perishing. We can say to God as did the palmist: “For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh” (Psa. 90:9).

2. Similarly, we can say that sin against God results in ***God’s just punishment of death.*** God had sent these poisonous snakes into the midst of His people. They deserved what they were experiencing. “The people spoke against God and against Moses.” They rebelled against God and His leader and so God punished them for their sin in His justice.

3. The bronze serpent that Moses held up publicly before the people was ***a portrayal of Jesus Christ hanging upon His cross.*** How is this? When Christ hung upon His cross He bore our sin in that He suffered the penalty that we deserved due to our sin. The bronze serpent represented the bearer of the sin of the people, of the sin that had brought God’s judgment upon them. Paul had written, “For our sake He made

⁵ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on John**, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, orig. 1869), pp. 154.

Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Of course the bronze serpent only set forth the imputation of the people’s sin upon the serpent. The serpent did not represent the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, but only that sin was atoned.

Now when Jesus hung on His cross, He did so as God the Father had constituted Jesus Christ as guilty for our sin, in which He died on behalf of His people. But as alluded to above, there is a reciprocal transaction that takes place when the sinner believes on Jesus Christ. When the sinner sees in Jesus Christ crucified that his sin was atoned for, when He believes on Jesus Christ alone for salvation, God, who had constituted Jesus Christ as a sinner, not only pardons him for all of his sin, but God at that moment constitutes that believing sinner as righteous. We are not made righteous in and of ourselves at that moment. That takes a lifetime of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. But from the moment of true faith in Jesus Christ, God no longer regards and treats that believer as a guilty sinner, but rather, as a righteous man, as righteous as Jesus Christ Himself. Our sin was laid upon Jesus; His righteousness is laid upon us. Sometimes it is likened to a robe of righteousness with which we are clothed. It covers our nakedness and shame of our sin. As the prophet once declared:

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
My soul shall be joyful in my God;
*For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
He has covered me with the robe of righteousness,*
As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments,
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (Isa. 61:10)

As a garment covers one’s shame of nakedness, so the robe of Christ’s righteousness which is given to every believer freely upon faith, covers his sinfulness. God sees the believing sinner clothed in the robe of Christ’s righteousness.

It is important that we think clearly about this matter, for error is common. Our friend, **Doug Vickers**, wrote of this:

First, consider the divine transaction that occurred on the cross. We adduce for that purpose the apostle’s explanation: “For [God] hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor 5:21). In short, on the cross, the guilt of our sin was imputed to Christ, or was placed to his account, in order that by reciprocal imputation his righteousness might be placed to our account. That statement from 2 Corinthians 5:21 states clearly that the latter proceeds from, in the sense that it is dependent on, the achieved righteousness of Christ. That follows, in the context of reciprocal imputation, because the perfect obedience that Christ offered to the demands of the law included the legal act of his dying on the sinner’s behalf. By that it is meant that in a significant sense Christ’s act of dying was itself obedience to law. For the law said that the guilty must die (Ezek. 18:4, 20). In, then, Christ’s submission to that requirement, submission, that is, in bearing the guilt of sin as our substitute, we see his final act of active obedience.

But the terms of the great exchange involved in what we have recognized as reciprocal imputation have not always been clearly understood or stated. When we refer to “guilt,” we do not have in view any such subjective notion as the unease of feeling that we may experience because of our default in a particular direction or matter. What is involved is not the subjective, but the objective unworthiness that characterizes us because we have not met the requirements of the law of God. We hold to the grand objectivity of the exchange referred to. For the essence of the meaning of “guilt” as now referred to is that guilt of unfulfilled obligation. But it is necessary to distinguish between what *was* thus imputed to Christ and what was *not* imputed to him. What was imputed was the sinner’s guilt. What was not imputed was the sinner’s sinful state. If the latter had been done, then Christ on the cross would have been made a sinner. We ask, was he guilty? And we answer “Yes.” But he was guilty, not of his own sin, for he was in every respect sinless, but of the sin of his people for whom he died.

It is unfortunately true that even in purportedly Reformed theological circles confusion and misleading errors on that critically important matter have occurred. Michael Horton, for example, so

completely misunderstands the atonement as to argue, with reference to what he terms the “marvelous exchange,” that “Jesus Christ, sinless in himself, became the greatest sinner who ever lived.”⁶ Christ was constituted guilty, but he was not constituted a sinner. Philip Hughes has again seen this important aspect of the atonement clearly: “God, declares Paul, made the Sinless One sin for us. It is important to notice that he does not say that God made Him a *sinner*; for to conceive of Christ as sinful, or made a sinner, would be to overthrow the very foundation of redemption, which demands the death of an altogether Sinless One in the place of sinful mankind.”⁷

God the Father constituted Jesus Christ as a sinner, and then He died on behalf of His people. Jesus Christ did not become a sinner. He bore our sin, for when He hung on the cross Jesus was holy, harmless, undefiled. But He bore our guilt; He suffered our condemnation. When Moses hung that bronze serpent on the pole and walked through the camp of Israel, he portrayed Jesus Christ as having been regarded guilty for our sin.

J. C. Ryle read perhaps a bit much into the emblem, but he certainly expressed rightly the truth of the matter:

As the serpent, lifted up on the pole, was an image of the very thing which had poisoned the Israelites, even so Christ in Himself had no sin, and yet was made and crucified “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” and counted sin (Rom. 8:3). The brazen serpent was a serpent without poison, and Christ was a man without sin. The thing which we should specially see in Christ crucified, is our sin laid upon Him, and Him (*sic*-He) counted as a sinner, and treated as a sinner, and punished as a sinner, for our redemption. In fact, we see on the cross our sins punished, crucified, borne, and carried by our Redeemer.⁸

4. Just as God’s mercy was extended to those Israelites who looked in faith upon God’s provision in that bronze serpent, which resulted in their instant healing and recovery from certain physical death, *so the sinner who simply looks upon Christ crucified for his sin will receive immediate pardon of sin and escape God’s judgment of eternal death receiving the gift of eternal life.*

The expression, “should not perish, but have eternal life,” is peculiarly strong. As the Israelite, who looked to the brazen serpent, not only did not die of his wounds, but recovered complete health, so the sinner who looks to Jesus not only escapes hell and condemnation, but has a seed of eternal life at once put in his heart, receives a complete title to an eternal life of glory and blessedness in heaven, and enters into that life after death.—The salvation of the Gospel is exceedingly full. It is not merely being pardoned. It is being counted completely righteous, and made a citizen of heaven. It is not merely an escape from hell, but the reception of a title to heaven. It has been well remarked, that the Old Testament generally promised only “length of days,” but the Gospel promises “everlasting life.”⁹

And so, here in **John 3:14f** the Lord speaks of the importance of His crucifixion in order to bring salvation to His people. The Son of Man must be “lifted up.” The verb is significant that Jesus used of both Moses and Himself as the Son of Man. The verb carries both the idea of Jesus dying on His cross, but also His exaltation to His throne. But further, it shows that it is through His dying, His being “lifted up” on the cross, that He is then qualified to be “lifted up” to His throne in heaven as King over the kingdom of God. As one wrote,

Jesus’ own carefully selected term, “lifted up” (ὑψωθῆναι -- *hupsothavai*) conveys a rich duality of meaning. In the context of the cross (the historical strand of the plot), the verb is able to speak of death,

⁶ Michael Horton, **The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 621.

⁷ Douglas Vickers, **The Triune Redemption of the Church**, (Presented at NERF on September 12, 2017), p. 15f.

⁸ Ryle, **John**, vol. 1, p. 155.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 157.

suffering, and defeat. But in its larger context (the cosmological strand of the plot), the verb is able to speak of exaltation in majesty and glorification (cf. Acts 2:33). In this one word, the message of the gospel is presented. It is only in his humiliation that Jesus can be exalted and glorified. And it is at the center of this irony that humanity receives eternal life “from above”—from Jesus. To look at Jesus is to understand the necessity of the exalted Son of Man on a cross, to understand how a crucified God can become for the world the greatest thing imaginable.¹⁰

Donald Carson stated the same thing in different words, perhaps with a clearer explanation:

The deepest point of connection between the bronze snake and Jesus was in the act of being ‘lifted up’. Moses *lifted up* the snake on a pole so that all who were afflicted in the camp might look and live. In the same way, *the Son of Man must be lifted up*. The Greek word for ‘lifted up’ (*hypsōo*) in its four occurrences in this Gospel (cf. 8:28; 12:32, 34) always combines the notions of being physically lifted up on the cross, with the notion of exaltation. This is a theological adaptation of the literal (‘to lift up’) and the figurative (‘to enhance’) meanings of the verb. Even Isaiah brings together the themes of being lifted up and being glorified, and this is in the context of the suffering servant (Isa. 52:13-53:12, esp. 52:13 LXX). If Jesus is the ‘one who came from heaven (v. 13), how shall he return? The Synoptists think of the crucifixion and the exaltation as temporally discrete steps; John makes it clear that Jesus’ return to the glory that he had with the Father before the world began (17:5) is accomplished by being ‘lifted up’ on the cross. It is this exaltation that draws people to him (8:28; 12:32). If in v. 13 the Son of Man is the revealer, the one who came down from heaven, here he is the sufferer and the exalted one—but it transpires that it is precisely in the matrix of suffering and exaltation that God most clearly reveals himself in the person of his Son.¹¹

It is interesting that in the Synoptic Gospels (and Hebrews) the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is His unjust rejection and humiliation. But in the Gospel of John the crucifixion is set forth as His exaltation, of His being “lifted up.”

“Still—and this is typical for the Fourth Gospel—the crucifixion is not presented as Jesus’ humiliation but as the exaltation of the Son of man. The reason, obviously, is that Jesus’ suffering and death were the way in which he would return to God and be glorified by him and that way he would grant eternal life to those who believed in him (v. 15).”¹²

The Holy Scriptures speak of this event of Jesus being exalted through His cross to His throne in heaven. Upon our Lord’s resurrection from the dead and His ascension into heaven, He was immediately enthroned as Lord of lords and King of kings. He took the scroll out of the Father’s hand, which was an emblem of the decree of God to fulfill His purposes in history through the establishment of His kingdom. This decree included the defeat and judgment of His enemies, but thankfully, His decree also included the salvation and exaltation of His people. When Jesus received that scroll from His Father’s hand, the Father conferred upon Him His royal authority as King over the kingdom of God. Upon His receiving this scroll, that is, His kingdom, we read of the heavenly chorus singing of the royal glory of Jesus Christ:

And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ²Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “**Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?**” ³And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it.

¹⁰ Klink, **John**, p. 203.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (William B. Eerdmans. 1991), p. 201.

¹² Herman Ridderbos, **The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary** (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 137.

⁴So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. ⁵But one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.”

⁶And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, *stood a Lamb as though it had been slain*, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷*Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.*

⁸Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying:

*“You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
¹⁰And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth.”*

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, ¹²saying with a loud voice:

*“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive power and riches and wisdom,
And strength and honor and glory and blessing!”*

¹³And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying:

“Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne,
And *to the Lamb*, forever and ever!”

¹⁴Then the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.

The Old Testament foretold this event of the suffering Savior becoming the exalted Lord. We read of the Suffering Servant in **Isaiah 53:10**.

Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him;
He has put Him to grief.
When You make His soul an offering for sin,
He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days,
And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in His hand.
¹¹He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied.
By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many,
For He shall bear their iniquities.

But then we read of His exaltation:

Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently;

He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high. (Isa. 52:13)

III. God's Love for the World (John 3:16)

Here we read perhaps the most commonly known and recited verse in the entire Bible. John 3:16 reads,

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.

This verse is not only the most well-known verse, but I suspect that it is probably the most misunderstood verse in the Bible. **John MacArthur** thought so. He wrote, "Love is the best known but least understood of all of God's attributes."¹³

John 3:16 is used by many to justify a spurious kind of faith that does not save. It is used by well-meaning, but misinformed Christians in what they tell non-Christians about God's love. There is a tendency for folks to assume that God loves all people alike, whether Christian or not, but the Bible does not teach this. This is an important matter. Wrong understanding about the love of God leads to false assumptions and wrong conclusions about the nature of God and His will. Some suggest that because God is love, that He is easy to appease with respect to sin. Their weak and shallow concept of divine love results in them justifying sinful behavior in themselves and others. A wrong view of the love of God frequently results in the error of sinful license. But when we consider the nature of God's love toward His people as it is actually presented in Scripture, we see that it leads to holy living, not loose living.

God reveals quite clearly and quite frequently in His Word that He has a love for His people that is unique and special, a special love for them that He does not have for the world. We read that Christ loves His church, and gave Himself for it. We read in John 13:1, "Then Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, *having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.*" God has a covenant love for His people that He does not have for any others. We will need to consider in some detail God's covenant love for His people. But first let us consider the meaning of John 3:16. Actually there are three ways in which John 3:16 is interpreted.

1. There are those that say that John 3:16 teaches that God loves everybody everywhere alike. **Arthur Pink** wrote of this:

God's love toward all His creatures is the fundamental and favorite tenet of Universalists, Unitarians, and Theosophists, Christian Scientists, Spiritists, Russelites (JW's), etc." No matter how a man may live in open defiance of heaven, with no concern whatever for his soul's eternal interests, still less for God's glory, dying perhaps with an oath on his lips—notwithstanding, God loves him we are told. So widely has this dogma been proclaimed, and so comforting is it to the heart which is at enmity with God—we have little hope of convincing many of their error.¹⁴

We may add to the list of those who espouse this interpretation all Arminians. They believe in a universal love of God for all mankind, that God loves everyone in the same way and to the same degree.

2. There are those that say that say that John 3:16 teaches that God loves His people from all over the world, not just Jewish people. In other words the word, world, is not to be understood as all humanity, but of a people comprised of those from the many nations of the world. This was the understanding of **John Gill** (1697-1771):

¹³ John MacArthur, **The Love of God**, (Word Pub., 1996), p. 1.

¹⁴ Arthur Pink, **Does God Love Everyone?** (Chapel Library, 2000), p. 2.

Our Lord was now discoursing with a Jewish Rabbi (i.e. Nicodemus), and that He is opposing a commonly received notion of theirs, that when the Messiah came, the Gentiles should have no benefit or advantage by Him, only the Israelites; so far should they be from it, that, according to their sense, the most dreadful judgments, calamities, and curses, should befall them; yea, hell and eternal damnation... Now, in opposition to such a notion, our Lord addresses this Jew; and it is as if He had said, you Rabbis say, that when the Messiah comes, only the Israelites, the peculiar favorites of God, shall share in the blessings that come by, and with Him; and that the Gentiles shall reap no advantage by Him, being hated of God, and rejected of Him: but I tell you, God has so loved the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, that He gave His only begotten Son; to, and for them, as well as for the Jews; to be a covenant of the people, the Gentiles, the Saviour of them, and a sacrifice for them; a gift which is a sufficient evidence of His love to them; it being a large and comprehensive one, an irreversible and unspeakable one; no other than His own Son by nature, of the same essence, perfections, and glory with Him; begotten by Him in a way inconceivable and expressible by mortals; and His only begotten one; the object of His love and delight, and in whom He is ever well pleased; and yet, such is His love to the Gentiles, as well as Jews, that He has given Him, in human nature, up, into the hands of men, and of justice, and to death itself.¹⁵

This is the view of many who are reformed. We understand that the Bible teaches that God has love for His elect, a love that He has for no one else but His chosen people. God loves them with a special, covenant love. He has loved them in Christ from the foundation of the world. It is not because the elect are more lovely or loveable, but because God set His love upon them in Christ before creation. And certainly the Holy Scriptures teach this truth. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

Again, **Arthur Pink** shows that the term “world” is a relative term that can mean different groups of people depending on the context in which the word “world” is found. Pink wrote:

The objector comes back to John 3:16 and says, “World means world.” True, but we have shown that “the world” does not mean the whole human family. The fact is that “the world” is used in a general way. When the brethren of Christ said, “Shew thyself to the world” (John 7:4), did they mean, “Shew thyself to all mankind”? When the Pharisees said, “Behold, the world has gone after Him” (John 12:19), did they mean that all the human family were flocking after Him? When the apostle wrote, “Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:8), did he mean that the faith of the saints at Rome was the subject of conversation by every man, woman, and child in earth? When Revelation 13:3 informs us that “all the world wondered after the beast,” are we to understand that there will be no exceptions? These, and other passages which might be quoted, show that the term “the world” often has a relative, rather than an absolute force.¹⁶

But there is a third interpretation of John 3:16 that is *also held by those who are reformed*. They affirm that God has a covenant love that is for His elect, and yet

3. They would say that John 3:16 teaches that God is loving toward all people, that He has a general benevolence for all people, because He made them, though He has a special covenant love for His elect.

J. C. Ryle and Matthew Henry advocated this understanding. **Matthew Henry** wrote:

Herein God has commended his *love to the world*: God so loved the world, so really, so richly. Now his creatures shall see that he loves them, and wishes them well. He so loved the world of fallen man as he did not love that of fallen angels (see Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10). Behold, and wonder, that the *great God* should love such a *worthless* world! That the *holy God* should love such a *wicked* world with

¹⁵ John Gill, Commentary on John, at 3:16.

¹⁶ Pink, pp. 5f.

a love of good will, when he could not look upon it with any complacency. This was a *time of love indeed* (Ezek. 16:6, 8). The Jews vainly conceived that the Messiah should be sent only in love to *their nation*, and to advance them upon the ruins of their neighbours; but Christ tells them that he came in love to the *whole world*, Gentiles as well as Jews (1 John 2:2). Though many of the world of mankind perish, yet God's giving his only-begotten Son was an instance of his love to the whole world, because through him there is a *general offer* of life and salvation made to all. It is love to the revolted rebellious province to issue out a proclamation of pardon and indemnity to all that will come in, plead it upon their knees, and return to their allegiance. *So far God loved the apostate lapsed world* that he sent his Son with this fair proposal, that *whosoever believes in him*, one or other, *shall not perish*. *Salvation has been of the Jews*, but now *Christ is known as salvation to the ends of the earth, a common salvation*.¹⁷

J. C. Ryle was more direct than Matthew Henry:

Nicodemus probably thought, like many Jews, that God's purposes of mercy were entirely confined to His chosen people Israel, and that when the Messiah appeared, He would appear only for the special benefit of the Jewish nation. Our Lord here declares to him that God loves all the world, without any exception; that the Messiah, the only begotten Son of God, is the Father's gift to the whole family of Adam; and that every one, whether Jew or Gentile, who believes on Him for salvation, may have eternal life.—A more startling declaration to the ears of a rigid Pharisee it is impossible to conceive! A more wonderful verse is not to be found in the Bible! That God should love such a wicked world as this, and not hate it,—that He should love it so as to provide salvation,—that in order to provide salvation He should give, not an angel, or any created being, but such a priceless gift as His only begotten Son,—that this great salvation should be freely offered to every one that believeth,—all, all this wonderful indeed! This was indeed a “heavenly thing.”¹⁸

We will consider one more opinion, which is also from a reformed commentator, **F. F. Bruce**.

If there is one sentence more than another which sums up the message of the Fourth Gospel, it is this. The love of God is limitless; it embraces all mankind. No sacrifice was too great to bring its unmeasured intensity home to men and women: the best that God had to give, he gave – his only Son, his well-beloved. Nor was it for one nation or group that he was given: he was given so that all, without distinction or exception, who repose their faith on him, might be rescued from destruction and blessed with the life that is life indeed. The gospel of salvation and life has its source in the love of God. The essence of the saving message is made unmistakably plain, in language which people of all races, cultures and times can grasp, and so effectively is it set forth in these words that many more, probably, have found their way of life through them than through any other biblical text.¹⁹

How may we best understand this important matter of the love of God for the world? The Bible pronounces and illustrates throughout its pages that our God is a loving God. This is a truth that rings clear and true, and acknowledged by all who call themselves Christians. But though the truth is commonly held and commonly affirmed, it is a subject that is commonly misunderstood. False assumptions are held; false assertions are made about God's love. **J. I. Packer** described it this way.

St. John's twice-repeated statement, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16), is one of the most tremendous utterances of the Bible—and also one of the most misunderstood. False ideas have grown up round it like a hedge of thorns, hiding its real meaning from view, and it is no small task cutting through this tangle of mental undergrowth.²⁰

¹⁷ Matthew Henry on John 3:16.

¹⁸ Ryle, pp. 157f.

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce, **The Gospel of John** (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 89f.

²⁰ J. I. Packer, **Knowing God** (Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), p. 117.

Sadly, many take the thought that God is love and then run with it, forming all manner of false thoughts about the nature of God and His ways among the peoples of the earth. The Bible states that God is love, but the Bible also defines what that love is like. "Scripture does not merely say 'God is love' and leave it to the individual to interpret subjectively what that means."²¹ Many, however, have done this. They suggest that because God is love, that He is easy to mollify toward sin and sinners. He does not look upon sin as a great evil to be punished with His eternal wrath, but merely as an unfortunate malady that needs healing. They then take their shallow, skewed concept of divine love and apply it as a means to justify their behavior and to form and shape a "christianity" that suits them.

They envision God as a benign heavenly grandfather--tolerant, affable, lenient, permissive, devoid of any real displeasure over sin, who without consideration of His holiness will benignly pass over sin and accept people as they are.²²

Perhaps the cause of greatest confusion about this subject is due to the failure to distinguish the *special love* that God has for His chosen people, over against the *general love* that He manifests for the whole world. There is a tendency for people to assume that God loves all people alike; consequently, they draw wrong conclusions about how God views people and how they relate to Him. Granted, there is a general love that God has for mankind, but there is a special love, a redeeming love, that unbelievers will never know for its objects are God's people only. In our treatment of this subject we will, therefore, attempt to distinguish between these two aspects of God's love as they are presented in the Holy Scriptures. But we will have to do so next Lord's Day, Lord willing.

Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always in every way.
The Lord be with you all. (2 Thess. 3:16)

²¹ MacArthur, **Love**, p. 35.

²² *Ibid*, p. 1.