

Message #10

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John

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FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

JOHN 3:13-16

I.

We humans are always looking for love. It seems to be part and parcel of the way that we are made. In times of difficulty we are looking for love to be expressed in terms of rescue from difficulty. Today many Americans are looking for a little love from government. Historically we humans have looked for love from revolutionary heroes. We have sought help from them in times of oppression. We often have not chosen well. The human saviors that we have picked have not proved to be so loving.

Russia in the early 1900s was ravaged by the First World War. The country was led by what was popularly viewed as an uncaring monarchy. A large part of the population turned to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (PROJECTOR ON--- LENIN) and his Communist sympathizers, hoping that they would rescue them from their situation of oppression and suffering. The fiftieth anniversary of the Communist revolution that he led happened just a couple of months ago.

A contemporary writer by the name of Andrei Platinov promoted Lenin as a loving savior of the Russian people. He wrote, "**Lenin is a rare, perhaps singular person in the world. Such people are created by nature only once in centuries.**" He went on to say that Lenin had an "**uncommon, miraculous heart, burning with love for humanity.**" ("Lenin," *Krasnaiaderevnia*, 11 April, 1920)

A retired Soviet general by the name of Dmitri Volkogonov wrote a biography of Lenin in 1994 (*Lenin, A New Biography*), after he accessed records of his life that had previously been hidden. He cited records where Lenin gave orders to kill large groups of people, foreign and domestic. He argues that Lenin sowed "**the seeds of the murderous collectivization... the appalling purges... and the postwar 'punishment' of entire nations.**" He described Lenin as "**merciless and totalitarian.**" He says that ultimately Lenin was the "**father of domestic Russian terrorism.**" (PROJECTOR OFF)

The passage before us today describes a much better candidate for being a lover of humanity. We have been studying John's Gospel in the New Testament. We have seen that the Apostle John is arguing that Jesus is the Son of God and that people should believe in Him. At the beginning of #2 we looked at the first of seven sign miracles. Jesus turned water into wine. Then He showed up in the temple in

Jerusalem, where he threw out money changers and animal sellers. In doing that, Jesus alienated the priests, who were connected to the party of the Sadducees.

Now in #3 Jesus is challenging a leading rabbi and member of the party of the Pharisees about his understanding of the Hebrew Bible and how it should be interpreted. This Nicodemus has become curious about Jesus, as a result of seeing miracles that Jesus has done. Jesus has told Nicodemus that he must be born again. This being born again, or from above, involves a call to a spiritual birth. Nicodemus is having a hard time understanding this. Today we shall see that Jesus gives a further explanation.

II.

So in v. 13 of John #3 we learn about THE AUTHORITY OF THE SON. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE AUTHORITY OF THE SON) Jesus is quoted as telling Nicodemus in v. 13, "**No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.**" Jesus has just told this leading rabbi that if he has difficulty understanding basic stuff about the kingdom of God and how to enter it, it will be even more difficult to tell him about heavenly things.

This leads to the claim of Jesus that He has authority that relates to His heavenly origin. He often refers to Himself as the Son of Man. This is an ambiguous term. It could be simply a title relating to His humanity. But a rabbi like Nicodemus would know that it was used in the Book of Daniel to refer to a heavenly being who appeared before God and was given a dominion, a kingdom. Jesus claims that He has come from heaven. Perhaps He is that heavenly being described in Daniel #7. Certainly He is claiming a certain authority that relates to His origin in heaven.

In Jesus' day there were many Jewish legends floating around about Old Testament saints who had supposedly ascended into heaven and returned with spiritual insights and directions from God. There were stories that Moses had actually gone into heaven to receive the Ten Commandments and the other parts of the Law. We will see several times later in this book that Jesus is compared to Moses.

Jesus is here denying these various legends about people who have ascended into heaven and returned with heavenly visions. He is saying that no one has ascended to heaven and returned. Jesus is not necessarily claiming that He has ascended into heaven. He is saying that He has come from heaven.

Some of you may have translations which add the phrase "who is in heaven" after "the Son of Man" at the end of v. 13. Some early manuscripts have this phrase. Some do not. It is possible that the Apostle John was just adding an explanatory note that Jesus was now in heaven. It is possible that a later scribe added an explanatory note that Jesus was not in heaven.

The main point is that Jesus is from heaven. He has the right to speak with authority. His recorded words reflect that authority. Nicodemus was accountable to God to listen and respond to what Jesus was saying. We have that same responsibility two thousand years later.

III.

Then in vv. 14 & 15 we learn about THE SACRIFICE OF THE SON. (III. THE SACRIFICE OF THE SON) In v. 14 Jesus says, "**And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...**"

The reference here is to an Old Testament story of which Nicodemus would have been familiar. Toward the end of the wilderness wanderings of the children of Israel who had escaped from slavery in Egypt, they came to the land of Edom. God told His people to go around this territory. The people grumbled and became impatient.

In Numbers #21 we read about what happened. (NUMBERS 21:5) Beginning in v. 5 we read, "**And 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 we loathe this worthless food.'**" That worthless food was manna, which had kept them all alive in a wilderness area that did not have food to support all of them. (NUMBERS 21:6)

Verse 6: "**Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. (NUMBERS 21:7) 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. (NUMBERS 21:8) 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.' (NUMBERS 21:9) 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.**"

It is a strange remedy for this situation. One of the Ten Commandments had a prohibition about making graven images of people or animals. Then the object that was made was an image of the cause of their difficulty, a serpent. But looking at this bronze serpent was the only way that bitten victims could be saved from possible death. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus' response gives us a hint about the reason for this Old Testament remedy. Nicodemus and the disciples of Jesus at the time would not have understood it. But it turns out that this Old Testament remedy was a picture of the deliverance that Jesus would one day provide by virtue of His being put on a pole of sorts.

The serpent, or snake, was, and is, generally regarded as a despicable creature. The Jews associated it with the cause of evil and sin in the Book of Genesis. In a similar way, crucifixion and the victims put on a cross, were associated with humiliation and evil. Victims were typically punished by the Romans for rebellion and sometimes were hung naked upon these wood crosses. Jesus would later claim that He was bearing the punishment for sin and the evil committed by humanity. In both cases, people were called to look upon the object put up on the pole for deliverance. The promise was that simply looking upon this object with the eyes of faith would provide deliverance.

Jesus was saying this to Nicodemus well before His crucifixion. Nicodemus didn't have a clue about what Jesus was saying. His disciples didn't understand it either. It would be only later that the Apostle John and His fellow disciples would understand what Jesus said to Nicodemus.

The Apostle John, as I have mentioned before, was fond of referring to words of Jesus that had a double meaning. The words "lifted up" in v. 14 can refer to a physical act, as with the lifting up of the bronze serpent upon a pole, and as with the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. But the original Greek verb can also be used in the sense of "glorified," or "exalted." As a result of the sacrifice of Jesus, our Lord was indeed exalted.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah predicted this. (PROJECTOR ON--- ISAIAH 52:13) In #52 of his prophecy, he wrote, "**Behold, my servant shall act wisely, he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.**" The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses that same Greek verb for "lifted up."

Verse 14 in our text is the first recorded reference by Jesus to His coming crucifixion. He also says that He "must" be lifted up. The crucifixion, and resulting exaltation, were part of the eternal plan of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verse 15 completes the sentence begun in v. 14: "**...that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**" There are slightly different translations that are made of this verse. There are technical grammatical reasons why this should more accurately read "**whoever believes may have eternal life in him.**" Even with this slight change, it is clear that the intended object of faith is the Son of Man who will be lifted. But the stress is upon the eternal life that is bound up with Jesus.

This is also the first of ten specific references in John's Gospel to eternal life. This eternal life, as we will see as we go along, is not just a future hope. It is a present possession that results from belief in Him. It is also not just a quantitative thing that has to do with how long we live. It is also a qualitative thing. In #10 we will see Jesus say that this life in Him is an abundant life.

The sole responsibility that Nicodemus, or anyone else, has is belief. As the Hebrews in the wilderness realized their dire situation--- as they were looking death in the face, a look of trust at the bronze serpent brought salvation from physical death. So also a look of faith for us upon the crucified and resurrected Christ, in the face of the realization of the consequences of our sins, produces a spiritual, eternal deliverance.

IV.

We come then to v. 16 and THE LOVE OF THE FATHER. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE LOVE OF THE FATHER)
This verse has been called "the greatest text in the Bible." It has been perhaps the most memorized verse in the Bible. In our ESV translation it is **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."**

The first issue to consider is whether these are the words of Jesus or of the biographer, John the Apostle. In the first century there were no punctuation marks that could be used to indicate when people were being quoted. They had no red letter editions of the Bible back in this time. So it is often difficult to know when the Gospel writers are quoting Jesus or when they are making their own comments. If the Bible is indeed inspired by God, the words are no less authoritative if the Gospel writers wrote them or Jesus spoke them.

I suspect that these are the words of the Apostle John for two reasons. First, I would expect that Jesus would be using a present tense verb if He was speaking to Nicodemus. That is not the case here. Second, Jesus in His speech consistently refers to Himself as the Son of Man. The term "only Son" is used elsewhere in John's Gospel only by the apostle.

We also need to notice what is perhaps obvious. God and His love is the subject of this verse. By "God" John is referring to God the Father, in distinction from God the Son, who has become Jesus.

Also most of our translations give us the impression that the author is saying that God loved the world "so much." By virtue of the usage of the original adverb in the New Testament, it is more likely that the author intended a slightly different nuance. He is saying that God loved the world "in this way." "For this is the way that God loved the world: He gave His only Son."

The verb for "love" is the strongest of several words for "love." Many of you are familiar with the Greek word for love, *agape*. This is the verb form of that word.

Then there is the term "world." There is disagreement among students of the Bible about the exact meaning of this term. Most of us in a simple reading of the text would assume that the author is saying that God loved all the people of the world. But some Calvinists argue that the author can only be talking about the elect. Jesus did not die for the non-elect, for those who do not become genuine believers.

It seems to me that this is reading a bit too much into the term. There is a theology professor and commentator by the name of D. A. Carson who wrote a book entitled *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*. (CARSON QUOTATION--- 1ST PART) He says, **"I argue, then, that both Arminians and Calvinists should rightly affirm that Christ died for all, in the sense that Christ's death was sufficient for all and that Scripture portrays God as inviting, commanding, and desiring the salvation of all, out of love..."** That makes sense to me.

He goes on (CARSON--- 2ND PART): **"Further, all Christians ought also to confess that, in a slightly different sense, Christ Jesus, in the intent of God, died effectively for the elect alone, in line with the way the Bible speaks of God's special selecting love for the elect."** There is more to think about and digest in this verse than perhaps some of us have ever imagined.

In regard to the author's reference to "world," it is important to remember the original context. Jesus was dealing with a Pharisee who was convinced that God loved the Jews. (PROJECTOR OFF) One early rabbi said that Abraham was stationed at the door of the Lake of Fire to prevent any Jew from entering this place. It was generally understood by the Pharisees that pretty much all Jews were going to be accepted into God's kingdom.

On the other hand no early Jewish writer affirmed that God loved people beyond the Jews, that God loved Gentiles. So at the very least the Apostle John in v. 16 is saying that God's love extended beyond the Jews to Gentiles. That would have been a shocking notion to Nicodemus and to most other Jews of the first century.

The author also says that "God gave His Son." There would appear to be at least two aspects involved in this "giving" of God's Son. He gave His Son first in the sense that He had Him become a human being. This is the Christmas story, the story of the Incarnation. God the Father also gave His Son for the purpose of the crucifixion. It was the death of Christ on the cross that paid the penalty for the sins of the world. That is the great picture of love. For a good Father to sacrifice His Son is a difficult thing to imagine and contemplate. The motive is love for the human creatures that He was involved in creating.

This kind of love on the part of a god was something that was especially difficult for the Gentiles of the first century to imagine. Many people in the Roman Empire were influenced by the thinking reflected in the writings of Aristotle, who said that the gods feel no love for mere humans. In Greek and Roman

mythology the gods tended to use humans for sport. They might have certain humans that they favored, but they had no general concern for their well-being. That is not the case for the God who is really there.

We come then to the part of the verse that has led to considerable misunderstanding and theological error down through the centuries. Some of us here grew up in Sunday school memorizing John 3:16 according to the King James Version of the Bible: "**For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...**" Cults, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, have used this verse to argue that Jesus Christ is not equal to God the Father. He is a created being. Indeed, this translation seems to imply that there was a time when the Son of God was begotten.

In the early 300s AD there was a priest in Alexandria, Egypt, by the name of Arius. He was a very intelligent young man and a serious student of the Bible. He was also an effective communicator. Like many other students of the Bible in this time, he was sincerely trying to figure out the relationship of Jesus Christ to God the Father. He came to the conclusion that Jesus Christ should not be honored in the same way that God the Father should be honored. (PROJECTOR ON--- ARIUS QUOTATION) He argued in this way: "**If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence; hence, it is clear that there was [a time] when the Son was not.**" That sounds like a reasonable argument, does it not? (2ND ARIUS QUOTATION) Arius continued, "**It follows then of necessity that he had his existence from the non-existent.**" The Son of God cannot then be eternal in the same way as God the Father is eternal.

The main theological opponent of Arius was a bishop by the name of Athanasius. He was convinced that the views of Arius posed a serious threat to Christianity. There were heated arguments about the views of Arius among the church leaders of the time. The Roman Emperor Constantine had recently declared himself to be a follower of Jesus. He became aware of this theological debate. There were also other questions among Christian leaders that needed to be settled. So in 325 he called for a church council to be held in the town of Nicea in Asia Minor. About 300 bishops showed up for the meeting, along with other church leaders.

In the end, the council rejected the view of Arius. They concluded that Jesus Christ was true God from true God and of one substance with the Father. They concluded in terminology that has come down to us in Latin and in English that the Son of God was begotten, but not made. That still leaves us with the problem of understanding what "only begotten" means.

The original Greek word in question is *monogene*. (*MONOGENE*) This adjective appears nine times in the New Testament. It is used by John and Luke and the author of Hebrews. The issue at stake is the origin and meaning of the word. (*MONOGENE... MONO...*) The prefix "mono-" obviously means "one," as in "monoplane." The second part of the word, *gene*, could be connected to *gennao*, which means "to

beget." Or it could be connected to the Greek word *genos*, which means "kind," or "type." In biology we refer to "genus," as a category of plants or animals.

So the question is: Does *monogene* mean "only begotten," or does it mean "one of a kind." In most of the New Testament usages, it is difficult to determine. For example, the word appears in Luke #7 v. 12. Jesus encounters a widow near the village of Nain who has just lost her son. He performs a miracle and raises him from the dead. (LUKE 7:12) Verse 12 says, "**As he [Jesus] drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the *monogene* son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her.**" *Monogene* here could be understood to mean either the only begotten son of this mother, or the one of a kind son of this mother. It seems to me that either understanding works.

Fortunately, we have Hebrews #11 v. 17, which gives us a conclusive answer. (HEBREWS 11:17) There we read, "**By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his *monogene* son...**" Was Isaac Abraham's only begotten son? No, he was not. For years earlier Abraham had begotten Ishmael. Was Isaac Abraham's one of a kind son, his unique son, his son with the special promises? Yes.

So we need to understand *monogene* to mean "unique, one of a kind," not "only begotten." The Son of God was never begotten. He is the one of a kind Son who has enjoyed an eternal relationship with God the Father. As the Apostle John says in #1, He was in the beginning with God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So God the Father demonstrated His love for the world of mankind by sending His unique Son to become a human being and to die on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. The required response from us humans is belief. It is trust in this God-man Jesus which is needed.

The author says that two things result from this belief. One is a negative. We will not perish. Followers of Jesus still experience a physical death. But what John is talking about here is the avoidance of eternal death, falling under the judgment of God that is described in the next verse.

The positive result that comes from believing in Jesus is the acquisition of eternal life. This involves both quantity of life and quality of life. It becomes a present possession at the moment of trusting belief in Jesus. In 1 John #5 we find this assurance. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 JOHN 5:11-12). The same Apostle John writes in #5 vv. 11-13 of his First Epistle, "**And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 JOHN 5:13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.**" We can know that we have eternal life, if we have believed in the Son of God.

Lee Bramlett was a Wycliffe Bible translator in Cameroon in Africa. He was translating the Bible into the language of a small tribal group called the Hdi. The verbs in their language ended either with an "i" or an "a" or a "u." But when it came to the word for "love," he could find only "i" and "a." Why no "u?"

Lee asked the Hdi translation committee, which included the most influential leaders in the community, **"Could you 'dvi' your wife?"** **"Yes,"** they said, That would mean that the wife had been loved, but the love was gone. It is past tense.

"Could you 'dva' your wife?" **"Yes,"** they said. That kind of love depended on the wife's actions. She would be loved as long as she remained faithful and cared for her husband well. It is conditional.

"Could you 'dvu' your wife? "Could you 'dvu' your wife?" Everyone laughed. **"Of course not! If you said that, you would have to keep loving your wife no matter what she did, even if she never got you water, never made you meals. Even if she committed adultery, you would be compelled to just keep on loving her. No, we would never say 'dvu.' It just doesn't exist."**

Lee Bramlett sat quietly for a while, thinking about John 3:16, and then he asked, **"Could God 'dvu' people?"** There was complete silence for three or four minutes; then tears started to trickle down the weathered faces of these elderly men. Finally they responded. **"Do you know what this would mean? This would mean that God kept loving us over and over, millennia after millennia, while all that time we rejected His great love. He loved us even though we have sinned more than any people."**

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

Henry Nott went to Tahiti two centuries ago to share the gospel with the people there. He worked hard to learn the native language and to translate the Bible into their language. He was there for 15 years and did not have one convert. When Henry Nott had translated the New Testament, he went to the Tahitian chief, a man by the name of Pomare II. The year was 1815. Henry Nott read to him John 3:16. The chief asked him to repeat it two times.

Chief Pomare responded, **"That may be true of you white folks, but the gods have no such love as that for us."** Mr. Nott explained that "whoever" means everyone. Chief Pomare said, **"Well, then, if this is the case, your book shall be my book, and your God shall be my God, and your people shall be my**

people and your heaven shall be my home. We, down in the island of Tahiti, never heard of any God that loved us and loved everybody in that way."

This led to a breakthrough for the gospel. Tahiti became largely Christianized. The Christians of Tahiti brought the gospel to Samoa. Christianity also took root there. Today, virtually every Samoan identifies himself as a Christian of some type. The breakthrough came through an understanding of John 3:16 on Tahiti.

Tua Tagovailoa is a Samoan who went to high school in Hawaii. He was a very good football player. He went to college in Alabama. On Monday night in the national championship game his team was behind that the half 13-0. Tua is a freshman and the backup quarterback. But he was called in to play in the second half. He led his team to a tie at the end of regulation. In overtime he threw a 41 yard pass to win the game. He was named the offense's most valuable player of the game. In the interview afterward he told the reporter, **"I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. With him all things are possible."** Such is the Christian tradition that can be traced back to the introduction of John 3:16 to the people of Tahiti.

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