**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**“God’s Love, His Gift, His Son”**

**John 3:16**

**December 24, 2023**

There are many verses in the Bible that great men have chosen as their favorite text. John Wesley, for example, often said that his favorite was Zechariah 3:2; “*Is this not a brand plucked out of the fire?*” David Livingston loved the last words of Matthew 28:20; “*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*.” John Newton said that his favorite verse was Romans 5:20; “*But where sin abounded, grace abounded even more*.” Martin Luther, of course, had Romans 1:17 as his life verse; “*The just shall live by faith*.” The reason was because of how the verse spoke to each man in light of his unique, life experience.

But the verse before us today is everyone’s verse. As James Montgomery Boice has noted, “There is hardly a place in the world to which the gospel has gone that this verse has not become almost instantly known. It is the first verse that translators put into another language. Millions of people have been taught to recite it. It is inscribed on books and buildings. It is reflected in songs. John 3:16! “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*” (The Gospel of John, Vol. 1).

Not only is this the most famous verse in the Bible, it’s the most famous summary of the gospel. It begins with the little word, “*For,*” which connects verse 16 to verses 14-15; “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” This sixteenth verse, therefore, “explains what happened to make it possible that someone can ‘have eternal life’ (v. 15), that is, through believing in Christ” (ESV Study Bible note). It’s an explanation that points us to the greatness of God’s love, His Gift, and His Son. There are no less than five parts of this verse that are especially noteworthy.

*First*, God’s love comes with a “so” attached to it, which points to how much He loved us: “For God *so loved* the world . . . .” The true measure of love is how much it gives, and here the measure of God’s love is the gift of His *only* Son to become flesh (the incarnation), and to die for sinners (redemption), so as to be the one Mediator who can bring us to God (reconciliation). In view of the context, when John writes that “*God so loved the world that He ‘gave, . . .’*” “gave” has as its primary reference Christ’s redemptive work of salvation on the cross. For these words come just after Jesus has said to Nicodemus, “*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up*” (NIV).

The story is told in the book of Numbers (21:4-9). Shortly after the exodus from Egypt, when Israel was traveling in the wilderness, snakes entered the camp and the people were being bitten – and they were dying. God told Moses to make a bronze serpent, set it up in the middle of the camp, and tell anyone who was bitten by the snakes to look at the bronze serpent and they would be cured. So they were. This was an amazing foreshadowing of the way in which we sinners may look to God’s only begotten Son. There He is, lifted up on the cross. He is dying in our place, acting as a substitute for sinners under the judgment of God. We look, we see our sins judged there, and we live. This is the beginning of the story of the love of God!

*Second*, God’s love extends to the whole world; “*For God so loved the world*. . .” Any Jewish reader would have been astounded by such a statement, simply because the Old Testament (and other Jewish writings) had spoken only of God’s love for His people Israel. But here we are told that the love of God is limitless. The gift of His Son was never given for just one nation or group of people. He was given so that *all without distinction* *of race or ethnicity* might be blessed with eternal life. God’s love for “the world,” therefore, made it possible for “whoever” believes in Christ – not Jews alone – to have eternal life and thus be “saved” from the penalty of sin. As verse 17 goes on to explain; “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*”

*Third,* God’s love is supremely evidenced by the gift of His “*only begotten Son*.” The Greek word underlying “*only begotten*” (*monogenes*) means “*one of a kind, or unique*.” The author of Hebrews, for example, uses this same word to refer to Isaac as Abraham’s “one and only son” (Heb. 11:17, NIV), since he was the only son given to Abraham by God’s promise (in contrast to his slave-son, Ishmael). So, when God gave us the gift of His only begotten Son, He gave us His very best. He gave us His one and only Son!

*Fourth*, God’s purpose in giving His only Son was to offer His great gift of eternal life to “*whoever believes in Him*.” In the New Testament, faith in Christ is *confident trust in* *Him alone*. It’s best expressed in an old Sunday School acrostic: **F – A – I – T – H**; **F**orsaking **A**ll; **I T**ake **H**im. Bishop J. C. Ryle has explained this well when he wrote the following:

 “Saving faith is the *hand* of the soul. The sinner is like a drowning man at the point of

sinking. He sees the Lord Jesus Christ holding out help to him. He *grasps* it and is saved.

This is faith (Hebrews 6:18).

 Saving faith is the *eye* of the soul. The sinner is like the Israelite bitten by the fiery serpent in the wilderness, and at the point of death. The Lord Jesus Christ is offered to him as the brazen serpent, set up for his cure. He *looks* and is healed. This is faith (John 3:14f.).

 Saving faith is the *mouth* of the soul. The sinner is starving for want of food, and sick of a sore disease. The Lord Jesus is set before him as the bread of life, and the universal medicine. He *receives* it, and is made well and strong. This is faith (John 6:35).

 Saving faith is the *foot* of the soul. The sinner is pursued by a deadly enemy, and is in fear of being overtaken. The Lord Jesus Christ is put before him as a strong tower, a hiding place, and a refuge. He *runs* into it and is safe. This is faith (Proverbs 18:10). (Old Paths, pp. 228f)

*Fifth*, and finally, God’s love *is* a saving love; “*whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life*.” “Of all the stars in the sky,” Spurgeon once wrote, “the North Star is the most useful to the mariner. This text is a North Star, for it has guided more souls to salvation than any other verse of Scripture. It is among promises what the Great Bear, Ursa Major, is among constellations” (Faith’s Checkbook).

This promise is at the very heart of John 3:16. When it speaks of the possibility of perishing, it reminds us that we are sinners, and that God must punish sin. That’s precisely why we need a Savior. If we could somehow get right with God by being a little less sinful than we are now, or by trying harder to please Him, then there would be no need for a Savior. But we are sinful, God is holy, and we deserve to perish. However, because of His great love, God gave His one and only Son to die on the cross for sinners, so that whosoever believes in Him *will not perish* but enter into eternal life.

A number of years ago I received a Christmas card upon which the words of John 3:16 were printed. The verse was arranged almost word by word down one side of the card, and on the other side was a list of descriptive phrases, one for each part of the verse. When you looked at the card, here’s what you would read:

 **“*Christ – The Greatest Gift*”**

 ***God The Greatest Lover***

 ***So loved The Greatest Degree***

 ***The world The Greatest Company***

 ***That He gave The Greatest Act***

 ***His only begotten Son The Greatest Gift***

 ***That whosoever The Greatest Opportunity***

 ***Believeth The Greatest Simplicity***

 ***In Him The Greatest Attraction***

 ***Should not perish The Greatest Promise***

 ***But The Greatest Difference***

 ***Have The Greatest Certainty***

 ***Eternal life The Greatest Possession***

How, then, should we celebrate Christmas? The fact that so many celebrate the day in so many non-Christian ways is no excuse for Christians to neglect it or misuse it. So, how should a *Christian* celebrate Christmas?

First, the best and greatest way to celebrate Christmas is by becoming a Christian – if you have never done so. John 3:16 points us in the right direction because it enables us to understand three simple truths about the Christmas message: (1) I am a sinner; (2) as a sinner I need a Savior; (3) Jesus Christ is that Savior. Hence the best way to celebrate Christmas is to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your sin-bearing Substitute. In the words of a familiar gospel hymn, “He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay; I needed Someone to wash my sin away . . .” If you have never trusted in Him to do that for you, then Christmas is a great time of year to believe in Him.

But assuming that you have believed in Him and that you are a Christian, what can you add to this in order to celebrate Christmas in the best way possible? John 3:16 helps us to answer that question as well. We can praise Him for His *great love*, for He loved us so much that He sent His only Son to become a man in order to die for us. We can praise Him for His *infinite power*, for the incarnation of His eternal Son is beyond our ability to even imagine. We can praise Him for His *sovereign grace* and mercy; for Christ Jesus was born to be our Savior, just as the Christmas Carol says:

Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice!

Now ye need not fear the grave: Jesus Christ was born to save!

Calls you one and calls you all to gain His everlasting hall.

Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!