**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**“God’s Love, His Son, His Gift”**

**John 3:16 (Part Two)**

**December 31, 2023**

In last week’s Christmas message, we noted that John 3:16 is the most famous verse in the Bible. It’s also the most famous summary of the gospel. Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic priest who launched the Protestant Reformation, called it “the gospel in a sentence;” “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*.”

Ironically, however, it’s a verse that’s often misunderstood. When John says that God’s love extends to “the world,” many use this verse to teach that the death of Christ atoned for the sin of every human being. On this basis, they believe that God loves everyone in the same way and to the same degree (as I once did).

An old friend has commented on this sort of thinking in his book, Chosen for Life. “Just think,’ we are told, ‘of the multitudes of men and women who have, do now, and yet shall swarm across the face of the earth. God loves them all, each and everyone. Indeed, God so loves them He gave His only begotten Son to die for each and everyone of them. Oh how great the love of God must be to embrace within its arms these uncounted multitudes of people” (Dr. Sam Storms).

But is this what John really had in mind when he wrote, “*For God so loved the world . . .*”? Does he really want us to perceive how *immeasurable* God’s love is by *measuring* how big the world is, or by *the quantity* of those for whom Christ died? The answer is . . . “Of course not!” Had Christ died for just *one sinner*, God’s love would be no less immeasurable than had Christ suffered for *all* the sinners in *all* the world!

That being said, it’s important to pause and reconsider just what this verse means when it says, “*God so loved the world* . . .” The best way to do this is by reading it in light of the overall context of John’s gospel (no surprise here!) There are two avenues of approach; and both will lead us to the same conclusion. The first focuses on the extent of Christ’s atonement; the second on the universal nature of God’s saving love for “the world.”

***First*,** there are other verses in this gospel where Jesus Himself makes it clear that His atonement was intended only for those whom God had chosen for salvation, namely the elect. Three notable examples come to mind:

(**a)** The Bread of Life Discourse:“*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given to me, but raise them up on the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day*” (John 6:37-40).

In the final analysis, God brings to faith all those whom He plans to redeem (the ones “given-by-the Father-to-the-Son”). No one who comes to faith has not been redeemed, and no one who has been redeemed does not come to faith. For everyone given-by-the-Father-to-the-Son “*will come to me*.”

(**b**) The Good Shepherd Discourse: “*I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd*” (John 10:14-16). Here Jesus teaches that the intent of His sacrifice is for “the sheep” (not the goats), *and* that He lays down His life for the “other sheep” (the Gentile nations) who are not part of “this sheep pen” (the Jewish nation). This is an obvious reference to the universal nature of the atonement, as taught by Jesus Himself. It’s not *all without exception*, but *all without distinction* of nationality or ethnicity.

In this same discourse, the limited scope of the atonement becomes even more clear when Jesus addresses the religious leaders of His day: “*The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand*. *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand*” (John 10:25b-29).

The best way to understand Jesus’ teaching is by means of a syllogism **(a)** The major premise: “*I lay down my life for the sheep*” (v. 14); **(b)** the minor premise (there are some who are “not my sheep,” v. 26); **(c)** the conclusion: there are some for whom Christ has not died.

(**c**) Jesus’ Prayer for His Disciples:“*I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours*” (John 17:9). The notes found in the Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible are especially helpful at this point: “Whatever benevolence Jesus has toward the whole created order, his redeeming, priestly activity has particular reference to the elect – those whom the Father has given him (10:14-15, 27-29). This verse strongly supports the doctrine of definite atonement, for it would be absurd for Jesus to die to take away the sins of those for whom he refused to pray.”

***Second****,* there are other verses which indicate that the term “world” should not be viewed as “all without exception” (everyone), but rather “all without distinction” of ethnicity or nationality (Jews and Gentiles). Three notable examples also come to mind:

(**a**). The Testimony of the Samaritans (John 4:39-42): This is the epilogue to the story of Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well and her subsequent belief in Jesus as the Messiah (4:1-26): “*Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did.’ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman, ‘We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world*.”

By using the term “world,” the Samaritans (who were half Jews and half Gentiles) were rejoicing that the saving message of Israel’s Messiah had been offered to *all* people, an “all without distinction,” or without regard for national or geographic criteria. Such is the greatness of the saving love of God! It extends beyond the borders of ethnic Israel.

(**b**). The Prophecy of Caiaphas (John 11:48-52).Shortly before His death, the Sanhedrin feared that Jesus’ ministry would arouse a popular revolt which the Romans would crush by force: “*If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will take away both our place and our nation*” (v. 48). In God’s providence, Caiphas offered the following response: “*You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish*” (vv. 49-50). Here’s John’s commentary: “*He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God* (the elect throughout the world), *to bring them together and make them one*” (vv. 51-52).

Imagine that! God used the words of a wicked man and, according to John, gave them a prophetic meaning that was quite absent from his thought or intention. It was a *blessing* that Jesus should die, because His death was necessary for the salvation of not only the Jewish *people*, but also of the elect who were scattered throughout “the world.” Once again, the world is *not* “all without exception” (everyone) but “all without distinction” (Jews and Gentiles).

(**c**). The Reactions of the Jewish Authorities (John 12:18-20).Shortly after Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, He made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Here’s John’s account of what happened: “*Many people, because they had heard he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!*’” (vv. 18-19). What follows is John’s footnote to this statement made by the Pharisees: “*Now there were some Greeks* (Gentiles) *among those who went up to worship at the feast* (Jews)” (v. 20). The “whole world,” once again, does not mean every single person who ever lived (all without exception) but all without distinction (Jews and Gentiles).

So, what’s the significance of all this for us? What does this tell us about the immeasurable love of God, which moved Him to send His one and only Son into the world so that you and I could be brought to faith in Him, and thus receive everlasting life? The answer is both simple and profound.

*First,* God’s love for the world assures us that those whom He has redeemed *will hear* the message of the gospel, and through hearing it, will be effectually called to repentant faith by the Holy Spirit. *Both* the invitation to believe and the effectual calling flow from His one and only Son’s sin-bearing death.

*Second*, when we come to appreciate the distinguishing love of God for us, we learn to thank Him *even more* for our salvation. For we know that without His redemptive love for us, and the working of His grace within us, all hope would have been lost!

“To God be the glory, great things He has done!

So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,

Who yielded His life an atonement for sin,

And opened the life-gate that we may go in.”

(Fanny Crosby, 1875, alt.)