

## An Intimate Conversation

### John 3:14-21

13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just 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.

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

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” If you grew up going to Sunday school, you cannot remember a time when you did not know this particular verse of Scripture. It is and has been the centerpiece of uncounted Sunday school and vacation Bible school classes, not to mention sermons! It is frequently lifted up as the perfect summation of Christian faith. (I quote it almost every Sunday in some part of the worship.) For a few years, references to the passage seemed to be everywhere. In every end zone, in every crowd, in every place that a television camera was pointing, it seemed as though you would find someone holding up a placard: “John 3:16.” This particular trend may have waned a bit of late, but still it is true: everyone knows John 3:16 or at least knows of John 3:16.

But where does this quote fit into the Gospel narrative? To whom was Jesus speaking? To his disciples? To his family? To the adoring crowd that followed him to witness his signs? Jesus made the statement in an intimate conversation

with a leader of the Jewish community. Nicodemus had come to visit Jesus at night. Scholars speculate that his nocturnal visit was because he did not want to be seen by his colleagues, talking with Jesus. Nicodemus was a Jewish leader and the majority of his peers, had identified Jesus as a rebel who did not obey the Laws of Moses. They said he was teaching others to do behaviors that were not in accordance to their customs, like healing on the Sabbath, touching people who were unclean with diseases, and talking to women who were not related to him. Nicodemus was an unlikely candidate to be having an intimate and deep theological conversation with Jesus...but here he is and Jesus reveals to him some of the most profound concepts of the Christian faith.

For God so loved the world ... It is possible to read the whole of Scripture, from the creation to the end times, as God's love story for the world. It was, after all, love that stirred God's heart at the pleading of the slaves in Egypt, and love that offered them both the guidance of the law and the security of the promised land. Whenever inequality or injustice threatened the welfare of the poor and the powerless (and therefore the whole people), God's love raised up prophets who declared God's desire for compassion—shown not just to insiders, but also to sojourners and foreigners within the boundaries of Israel.

It was divine love, stronger than well-deserved judgment, that carried Israel during the time of exile, and the love of God that was celebrated with the psalms of adoration in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. It was God's love that sent Jesus, God's Son, to be incarnate in the world, where he taught that love is not merely for those who look and think and believe like us, but even for our enemies and those who persecute us. It was love that stirred the first-century church to open the doors of communion not only to Jews but also to Gentiles, not only to those deemed worthy but also those whose very existence was troubling: the halt, the lame, the blind, the eunuchs.

Even in our own day, when established powers have sought to limit God's love by the exclusion of others from full participation in the community, divine compassion for the oppressed and divine passion for justice have called forth prophets to declare that God's love includes all, regardless of age or race, nationality or creed, gender or sexual orientation. The cumulative weight of the biblical record and the multifaceted experience of salvation within the contemporary church seem clear: God so loves the world ... **Paul C. Shupe**

Lent is a time of repentance and decision. This crisis of decision is clearly fleshed out in Jesus' astonishing, intimate, nocturnal conversation with Nicodemus. John suggests that Nicodemus represents those drawn to Jesus by the signs that he is doing (2:23–25). Before he can even ask a question, Jesus interrupts him to say that a faith based on signs (i.e., mighty works and wonders), is inadequate. To see the kingdom of God, even he, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, has to be born again/from above (v. 3). Taking Jesus literally, Nicodemus misunderstands, and Jesus goes on to explain what this means (vv. 5–21).

Jesus draws an analogy between the “lifting up” of the Son of Man and Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness so that all who look to the serpent might be saved from death from poisonous snakebites (Num. 21:4–9). In like manner, the Son of Man must be “lifted up” so “that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (vv. 14–15).

The Son of Man does not just offer life; the Son of Man offers eternal life. But it is not enough to look at the Son of Man; we must believe in him. In John, “believe” is always an action verb. It is something you do, and it must not be reduced to merely giving mental affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God, or that he was raised from the dead. While such affirmations are involved in believing, for John believing is much more: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath.” For

John, the opposite of belief is not unbelief but disobedience. To believe, therefore, is to obey (cf. 12:44–48; 14:15, 21; 15:10)!

Those who believe may have “eternal life.” This change in human existence is made possible by believing in Jesus (3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:27; 17:4). It is not a quantity but a quality of life (10:10), not just an unending human existence but life lived in the presence of God. This life is available to the believer now because the Son of Man has been “lifted up,” and “exalted.” The humiliation of crucifixion is the glory of the exaltation for Jesus. There is no exaltation apart from crucifixion; no cross, no crown! In the face of the unexplainable, Jesus reaches for an analogy for the life-giving mystery of the cross.

John 3:16 announces the “why” of Jesus’ life and death: “God so loved the world” (i.e., those at odds with Jesus and God, 1:10; 7:7; 15:19) that God “gave” his only Son (cf. 1 John 4:9–10 and Rom. 5:8). Now “everyone who believes in him ... may have eternal life.” “Everyone” makes the offer inclusive. To believe is to have eternal life now. To disobey is to perish. We must make a choice. The fact is that God sent his Son, not to condemn the world, but to save it. To believe is to be saved. To refuse to believe is bring our own judgment.

This judgment is based on our response to the light that reveals a person’s true identity. According to the beginning John’s Gospel, Jesus is “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (1:9). Those who believe (that is, those who are obedient to God’s revelation of himself in Jesus) “do what is true”; their deeds are “done in God,” and, therefore, they come to the light. To love darkness rather than light is disobedience, which results in the evil deeds that the light exposes. The coming of Jesus results in a crisis that demands a decision. Neutrality is not a possibility. In love, God sent Jesus to save the world, but each person must decide whether to believe/obey and live in the light or disobey and continue to live in the darkness. Our decision about Jesus determines our eternal destiny. Not to decide is to decide!

Lent is the perfect time to consider our response; a perfect time to consider the nature of our obedience in light of the images of Jesus' obedience. During his forty days in the wilderness he rejected Satan's temptations to be another kind of messiah (Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). After the feeding of the multitude he rejected the people's efforts to "make him king" (John 6:15). In the Garden he turned back his own desire to have it another way (Mark 14:32–42). Even on the cross he rejected the temptation to "save" himself (Matt. 27:38–44). Jesus "became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). **W. Hulitt Gloer**

It is one of the best-known and best-loved verses in the Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Jesus made this statement to Nicodemus in a late night, intimate conversation.

Scripture proclaims that God's extravagant love for the world is a self-giving act of grace. Because of God's love for the world, God gave his incarnate, crucified, resurrected Son. John's Gospel assures us that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

The apostle Paul declares, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, the relationship between God's grace and human faith is one of mutual interaction. Our scripture opens us to a rich awareness of the gospel, an intimate conversation with Jesus, in which the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit become basic to who we are. **Joseph D. Small**