

Sunday, April 24, 2016

Last year, I was picketing Pope Francis's visit to New York City in the middle of a giant mob of people. The sign I carried said "GOD HATES PROUD SINNERS." We normally cite Psalm 5:5 on that sign:

"The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity." (Psalm 5:5)

As I stood in that large crowd of people, I heard a sanctimonious voice from behind me, speaking softly just a few inches from my ear. He quoted John 3:16 to me, as if that somehow negated the fact that God hates all workers of iniquity:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

As I turned around to face him, I started quoting Psalm 5:5 to him, but stopped when I realized that this was a NYPD police officer quoting this verse in my ear! Instead I told him "you ought to not be peddling your false religion to people, especially when you're wearing that gun and badge." So he quoted it again. Of course, John 3:16 is a wonderful verse. It is not false religion. But what he (and every other false Christian) thinks it means is false religion.

John 3:16 is the most famous verse in the Bible. The next time you go to a hotel, check out the Gideon Bible – it has that verse translated in 26 languages. You see it on bumper stickers, billboards, signs at sporting events, wristbands, jewelry, clothing, coasters, the bottom of In-N-Out Burger paper cups, Tim Tebow's face, coffee mugs, license plates, tattoos, lunch boxes, smartphone cases, etc. It is so well-known that oftentimes, people will only display the numbers "3:16" and everybody knows what it means. Most so-called Christians couldn't quote you a Bible verse if their very life depended on it. But among those who can quote a verse, John 3:16 is often the one and only one that they know.

It is also the most abused, twisted and misinterpreted verse in the Bible. It is shamefully commercialized and the casual way that it is thrown around by Satanic "Christians" has caused the love of God to lose all of its meaning. It has been perverted to the point where you almost feel like a heretic for even citing it, let alone quoting it. You don't want to be accounted in that group of phony Christians who have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof (2 Timothy 3:5). But this is a device of Satan. We cannot forsake this precious Word of God just because Satan is abusing it. He is, after all, transformed into an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). John 3:16 is a message from our Father, so we must get to the bottom of what it means. Hopefully, to one degree or another, I can give the sense of this verse, like they did in the days of Nehemiah:

“So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused *them* to understand the reading.” (Nehemiah 8:8)

From what I’ve seen, the verse is misused in two major ways, both of which fall under the category of human pride. The two are: 1. To justify sinning in the face of God, “turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness” (Jude 4); and 2. To justify a false doctrine that glorifies the human will. Under the first point, what the verse means to much of mankind is what we see those wicked men saying in Malachi 2:17 and Jeremiah 7:10: “Every one that doeth evil *is* good in the sight of the LORD, and he delighteth in them” and “We are delivered to do all these abominations.” This is why you will frequently see John 3:16 on signs when people are picketing against this church. That and 1 John 4:8 (“God Is Love”). They say “God loves everyone, so that means it’s OK for me to sin.”

Under the second point, if you talk to nearly any professing Christian about John 3:16, they will say it means something like this:

“God loved every individual of mankind soooooo much that He sent His Son to die for each and every one of them, so that whoever exercises his free will and accepts Jesus as his personal savior will not perish, but have everlasting life.”

If this was the only verse in the Bible, you might be able to say that this is what it means. But we have to read this verse in the light of the rest of the Scripture (including the rest of John 3), and such an interpretation goes against multiple of the major doctrines that God has revealed to us (e.g., election, reprobation, predestination, limited atonement, the sovereignty of God, the hatred of God, the will of God, etc.). We will find that this chapter out of John is one of the strongest parts of scripture against the free will of man in the matter of salvation, and for the limited design of the atonement.

Please understand that one of the most important things in the universe is being called into question here – that is, the atonement of Christ. Who was it for? Every human who ever lived? Or only His elect? The doctrine of “limited atonement” (also called “particular atonement” or “definite atonement”) is probably the most hated of all of the 5 points of Calvinism. Not only do Arminians despise this doctrine, but whenever you hear of a so-called “4 Point Calvinist” (the fancy term for this is “Amyraldism”), this is the doctrine that they drop. These various forms of heretics teach that Jesus did not actually atone for anyone, but rather made atonement possible for everyone, contingent on the exercise of their free will to believe in Him. In other words, man, not God, they say, is the one who ultimately decides who is going to be reconciled with God and go to heaven. The Bible teaches, and we therefore believe, that God did **not** send His Son to die to give every human only the possibility to be saved (which would also necessarily include the possibility that **nobody** would be saved). We

believe that God had an eternal plan to ensure the salvation of His people, and Christ died only for those people.

“All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” (John 6:37-38)

This doctrine of “limited atonement” is a subject for another sermon, but suffice it to say that “the Good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep” and only the sheep. He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him. Some people are not of His sheep (and therefore the Good Shepherd did not give His life for them), and those people who do not believe do not believe because they are not of His sheep (John 10). Human beings in all of their pride simply cannot accept that they do not have a part in salvation.

So, let’s move on to John 3:16. The first thing to do when you want to know what a verse means is to look at the context of the verse:

“There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness. If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, *even* the Son of man which is in heaven. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the

condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.” (John 3:1-21)

I’m not going to go through each verse in this passage, but I will point out a few things that are important in the context.

First of all, who is Jesus talking to? It’s a conversation between two people – Jesus Christ and Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a master of Israel. In fact, when Jesus calls him “a master of Israel”, the original Greek lends itself to being translated as “THE master of Israel” or “THAT master of Israel.” The idea being that this wasn’t just some ordinary master, or doctor, or teacher – this is the main one in all of Israel! This is the man who is spoken of far and wide and is a teacher of teachers. All of the commentators say that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, which was a religious court made up of 71 men (high priest, priests, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, etc.) It was this Jewish court that tried Jesus and turned him over to the Romans to be crucified.

Nicodemus came to speak to Jesus by night, because he was ashamed to be seen with Him. He had a reputation to uphold! This shameful behavior is mentioned every time we read anything that has to do with Nicodemus, but it appears that he came around and ultimately believed, or at least became bolder in his behavior regarding Christ. In John 7 during the Feast of Tabernacles, as one of the Pharisees on the Sanhedrin, he spoke up and helped keep the bloodthirsty chief priests and Pharisees at bay: “Doth our law judge *any* man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?” (verse 51). Then at the death of Christ in John 19, only two people are mentioned as being involved in taking His body from the cross and preparing it for burial: Joseph of Arimathaea, and Nicodemus (verses 38-40).

This is that Nicodemus who Christ is talking to. The master of Israel. The great teacher. No doubt, he held and taught the commonly believed notion that the Messiah was coming to set His kingdom up for Jews, and only Jews. This was very commonly believed amongst the Jews, and is a topic that comes up repeatedly in the New Testament. It wouldn’t have been a commonly held belief if the teachers weren’t teaching it! That’s why in Acts we see that the Jews were astonished when they saw that God gave the Holy Ghost also to the Gentiles:

“And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.” (Acts 10:45)

And the Jews not only thought that Gentiles wouldn’t be saved, but their very presence was a pollution:

“The Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all *men* every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place.” (Acts 21:27-28)

Nicodemus’s incorrect notion of the kingdom of the Messiah is also why the first words out of Christ’s mouth to him were “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” As much as if to say, “You don’t understand that the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, so I’m going to teach you a few things about it, starting with the fact that you must be born again before you can even SEE the kingdom.”

Second, what does it mean to be born again? Please remember our brother Jon’s sermon on Total Depravity. That is the state that we are born into. It is called being “born of the flesh.” We are depraved, fallen children of wrath by nature, and are totally unable to receive the things of God, which is why the doctrine of “Total Depravity” is sometimes called “Total Inability.” We have words in the scripture like “behold, their ear *is* uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken” (Jeremiah 6:10); “the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive” (John 14:17); “Why do ye not understand my speech? *even* because ye cannot hear my word.” (John 8:43); “no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Corinthians 12:3); “Therefore they could not believe.” (John 12:39). “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” (John 6:44). “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? *Then* may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.” (Jeremiah 13:23). The natural man, in summary, is incapable of receiving the things of God:

“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14)

It goes against your very nature to believe in and love Him. By nature, you hate God. In order to take any interest in God, you must be born again. It is called being “born of the Spirit.” We are regenerated and given a new heart and a new spirit by God (Ezekiel 36:26). We, who were spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, have been quickened by the Spirit of God (Ephesians 2:1,5). It is God “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Colossians 1:13). “It is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13). It is God who says “I will give them an heart to know me.” (Jeremiah 24:7). It is “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, [who has] shined in our hearts.” (2 Corinthians 4:6). This work of regeneration is 100% a work of God. You have as much control over being born again as you had over being born the first time:

“But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:4-7)

“Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” (James 1:18)

“Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” (1 Peter 1:3)

“Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” (1 John 5:1)

And for those of you listening to this who have built an entire theology on John 3:16, to the exclusion of the rest of the Bible, please note that Jesus teaches the same thing right here:

“The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

Being born again is a work of the Spirit of God. It is compared to the wind. It blows wherever it feels like blowing, and when you hear it, you don't know where it came from, and you don't know where it's headed next, but you know it's there and that it hit you. Sometimes the wind is strong like in a storm, and sometimes it is an almost imperceptible zephyr. You don't exercise your free will to direct the wind, and you don't exercise your free will to direct the Spirit of God. I've always found it a little bit amazing that John 3:16 is the most popular verse in the Bible that is used to support “free will” in the matter of salvation, but the context uses some of the clearest language in all of the Scripture to teach the opposite.

Third, what is this about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness? We can read about it in Numbers 21:

“And they journeyed from mount Hor by the way of the Red sea, to compass the land of Edom: and the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for *there is* no bread, neither *is there any* water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD, and against thee; pray unto the LORD,

that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.” (Numbers 21:4-9)

There is a lot of symbolism in this story. For example, the brazen serpent is obviously a symbol of Christ. It was lifted up, even as Christ was lifted up. It had the form of a serpent, but without the poison or venom of a serpent; Christ came in the likeness of sinful flesh, but without the sin. Looking upon the serpent was the only way for the Israelites to be saved from that affliction; looking upon Christ through faith is the only way for us to be saved. The people who were convicted of their sin (“We have sinned!”) and knew that only God could save them were the ones who went to Moses to pray for them; and now “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9). One look at the serpent, no matter how far away, or how weak a look, and the person was cured; true faith in Christ, even if a weak faith, is a gift from God, by which we are justified. Looking upon the serpent defies human reason (who ever heard of looking at a sculpture to stop poison from flowing through your veins?); looking upon Christ defies human reason. The bites and venom of these serpents represent the death sentence that we are living under due to sin. They had become acute, and it was an emergency situation; even so, when a person understands that he has sinned. God could have taken the serpents away, as the Israelites requested, but instead He provided a remedy to heal them; God could have taken our sinful, fallen state away, but instead He has likewise provided us a remedy.

[As a side note, the Israelites kept this brazen serpent around with them until the times of Hezekiah, and worshipped it as an idol: “He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan.” - 2 Kings 18:4. It reminds me of all of the phony Christians we see parading around displaying crosses.]

This passage in Numbers is frequently used to justify universal atonement (that is, that Jesus died for everyone), and free will. They say that the bitten Israelites represent all of mankind, the serpent of brass represents Christ, and anyone has the option of looking on the brazen serpent if he so chooses. We know this interpretation is wrong because it goes against the teaching of the rest of Scripture. But we also know it’s wrong by reading the passage carefully.

When I read this passage, I see at least four classes of people (and really, there are only two classes of people here – the first three are just different flavors of the same thing):

1. Those who were bitten and died before the brazen serpent was lifted up: “and much people of Israel died.” This represents people who have never heard of Christ. How can God be said to send Christ for every human who has ever lived when, in His sovereign will, He has withheld Christ from being preached to countless souls? The same God who has determined to save someone will provide all the means for that person to be saved. To me, this one in and of itself kills the doctrine of universal atonement that supposedly is taught in this passage.
2. Those who were not bitten at all. It is implied by the conditions of “every one that is bitten” and “if a serpent had bitten any man” that some of those Israelites had not been bitten. Of course, there were a precious few truly righteous men (e.g., Moses) who had not been bitten, but I believe that primarily, this class of people would stand representative of those proud sinners who already believe that they are righteous, and don’t have any need of being saved. This is what Jesus meant when He said “They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Mark 2:17).
3. Those who were bitten and did not look upon the brazen serpent. Again, it is implied by the conditions of “when he looketh upon it” and “when he beheld the serpent of brass” that not everyone actually did look upon it. Some people would have thought it was ludicrous to look on a piece of metal. “You’re telling me that if I look on this serpent made out of brass it will cure me of these poisonous bites? That doesn’t make any sense!” This, my friends, is one of the reasons why the world is full of false religion and other “self help” programs. This class of people is symbolic for those who know that they are sinning, and know that they are guilty, but will look on anything and everything to take that burden away...except Christ. “Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” (Luke 13:24). “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber...I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.” (John 10:1,9). “And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless.” (Matthew 22:12).
4. Those who were bitten and looked upon the brazen serpent. These are those people who are burdened by sin, understand that they are living under a sentence of condemnation, and look to Christ as the only way to be saved. AKA God’s elect.

It is pretty clear to me that God commanded the brazen serpent to be lifted up on a pole with the intent of only healing those people in that 4th class of people. The brazen serpent was not lifted up willy-nilly for everyone in Israel. It clearly says that those people who would live had the following two characteristics: 1. They were bitten. 2. They looked upon the brazen serpent. God did not intend for the serpent of brass to be for anyone else. Likewise, Christ was only given for those who would believe. Note that the passage in Numbers 21 doesn’t say

one word about free will, and neither does John 3:16. These passages don't tell us anything about why some people believe, and some don't. We find those answers in other verses. This raises one question, which is, if the serpent was intended only for certain people, why was it lifted up to everyone in the vicinity? And in terms of what we're dealing with in our era, if Christ was only intended for certain people, why must He be preached to everyone? Well, this is how the Lord has determined to call His people out of the masses. And, this is how a clear line of demarcation is made between the two types of people:

“For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one *we are* the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who *is* sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:15-16)

“But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24)

Now that we've looked at some of the context that comes before John 3:16, let's move on to the verse itself. I'll break it up in a few pieces and look at some details, particularly focusing on the parts that are the most misunderstood or misinterpreted.

For God so loved the world

For – Don't forget that the verse starts with the word “for.” Usually when you see this word at the beginning of a sentence, it means “I'm getting ready to clarify or give some more information about something that I just said.” You can't fully understand what John 3:16 is saying unless you understand the thing that came right before it, which is why I just spent all that time talking about the serpent in the wilderness. A lot of people leave this word “for” out when they're trying to quote this verse. Most people who quote this verse to you will look at you with a dumbfounded look if you ask them to tell you what the sentence right before John 3:16 says. For your reference, it says this:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:14-15)

So – Most people think that the word “so” signifies intensity. Like “God loved the world so much.” That's not what the word means. The word means “in this manner” or “likewise” or “in like manner.” If I tell my kids “put the dishes away just so” I mean “put the dishes away in the manner that I'm showing you.” Many have said that since this word translated “so” is the first word in this verse in the original Greek, it is pointing back to the previous sentence. So it would mean “God loved the world in the same manner that I just told you about.” I think that

is correct, which makes it all the more crucial that we understand the context that this verse sits in. The God that is said to love the world in John 3:16 is the same God that verse 14 points to, who killed people with fiery serpents due to their murmuring and ingratitude. John 3:16 points back to that event. The God of the New Testament is the same God as the God of the Old Testament. How many times have we heard people say “don’t preach the hateful and wrathful God of the Old Testament” and then proceed to use John 3:16 to tell us that the God of the New Testament is a loving God? We hear it every day. Well, this scripture teaches us that it is the same God. The God who loves is also the God who kills. The God who loves is the same God who has also already condemned those who don’t believe (v. 18).

Loved – This is “agape” love in this verse. There is a lot that could be said about this, but I will limit it now to just say that this type of love is the highest form of love. It is not a sappy, maudlin emotion like you might have listening to a sentimental song or watching a sentimental movie. And it certainly isn’t a love which rejoices in iniquity (1 Corinthians 13:6), which is what most people would have us believe. It is a love that is generally accompanied by action. And the action here that demonstrates God’s great love for the believers in the world is that He gave His only begotten Son. Just like those Israelites in the wilderness, we have been (and sometimes backslide into being) unthankful murmurers, and are worthy of death. And just like with them, God has provided us a remedy.

As a sidebar, we do not deny that the Lord has a general mercy over all of His creation in temporal matters. For example:

“The LORD *is* good to all: and his tender mercies *are* over all his works.” (Psalm 145:9)

“For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.” (1 Timothy 4:10)

And when commanding us to love our enemies, the reason He gave for it is:

“That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:45)

But this passage isn’t about God’s general mercy over His creation. This passage is about the salvation of our eternal souls, and in that matter, God does not love everyone. That special love is reserved for His elect. And God’s hatred of Esau puts that issue to rest:

“As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” (Romans 9:13)

Furthermore, if Jesus loved everyone and died for everyone, He sure had an interesting way of

showing that when He did not pray for everyone:

“I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.” (John 17:9)

World – The Greek word “kosmos” which is translated “world” here can have a variety of meanings, depending on the context. It very rarely means “every individual of mankind who has ever lived,” and only a simpleton would just assume that that’s what it means here or anywhere else. Once again, you have to look at the context, and compare scripture to scripture. A good exercise would be for you to go find all of the places that “kosmos” is used in the New Testament and look at all the different meanings it has, depending on the context. I’ll give you a couple examples:

“The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him.” (John 12:19)

“If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.” (John 15:19)

Try substituting “every individual of mankind who has ever lived” wherever “world” is used in those two verses, and you’ll understand what I’m talking about.

The more I’ve studied this, the more I am convinced that the word “world” is used in John 3:16 to teach the message that this blessing of Christ isn’t only for the Jews – it is for the whole world. That is, it is for believers, whether Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28). Recall, please, what I said earlier about Nicodemus, and the belief that the Jews widely held that the Messiah would only be for them, and not Gentiles. Recall also that the story of the serpent in the wilderness had only Israelites being saved. The message is “God showed His love to the Jews by giving them the remedy of the brazen serpent, but God doesn’t just love the Jews. He has in like manner shown His love for the whole world, in that He gave His only begotten Son, that all those who believe in Him, whether Jew or Gentile, should be saved.” Obviously, based on reading what the whole verse says, the scope of the “world” is limited to believers – it isn’t universal, and it isn’t talking about every human who ever lived. More about “believers” in a bit.

That He gave His only begotten Son

That – I have heard people try to qualify what the word “world” is talking about with the phrase “that He gave His only begotten Son.” So, they may say, “it is not everyone; it is the world of people that He gave His only begotten Son to.” While that statement is true, that’s

not what the words say in this verse. This word “that” could be translated “in that” or “therefore” or “insomuch that.” So that the meaning of it is something like “He loved us, and for that reason, He gave His only begotten Son” or “He loved us, therefore He gave His only begotten Son” or “He demonstrated His love by giving His only begotten Son” or “He loved us to such an extent that He gave His only begotten Son.”

Gave – This word signifies that it was His choice. It was His gift. It was His will. It was not based on anything good in us, but rather a result of His everlasting love for us. He didn't have to do it. While we were yet sinners, He loved us and sent His Son to die for us. That is a great, inconceivable love. His Father gave Him into the hands of wicked men (Acts 2:23) for us.

“In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.” (1 John 4:9)

Note that giving His Son for us includes giving us all of the necessary things that surround that, like faith, repentance, etc.:

“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

And, note also that just because it says that the Father gave the Son, that doesn't mean that the Son went unwillingly. It also says that Christ gave Himself:

“...our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father.” (Galatians 1:3-4)

“No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.” (John 10:18)

Only Begotten Son - This is a phrase that has given rise to a lot of heresy. People use these words to claim that Christ is not eternal, and that He is a mere creature. The Greek word is "monogenes" which means "the only one of its kind." We see the word being used to describe Isaac, even though Isaac was not Abraham's only son. Isaac was, however, the son of promise.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.” (Hebrews 11:17-19).

God has lots of sons and daughters by adoption (Ephesians 1:15), but Christ is uniquely His Son in many ways. The word could be used to denote something that was created or had a beginning, but when used of Christ, it obviously doesn't mean that:

"...whose goings forth *have been* from of old, from everlasting." (Micah 5:2).

" In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God." (John 1:1-2)

That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life

That – This usage of our English word “that” is different than it was earlier in the verse. This time it is talking about intention or purpose. It means “in order that” or “so that” or “to the intent that.” We’re talking about the intention of God here, which cannot be frustrated. God gave His only begotten Son, in order that all believers should not perish, but have everlasting life. There are people who use this language to say that there is only a possibility, or there is some doubt, of not perishing and having everlasting life. But when we’re talking about the intentions of God, nothing is more certain. “The LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul *it*?” (Isaiah 14:27). Therefore, all believers will not perish, and will certainly have everlasting life.

Whosoever – People fixate on this word at least as much as they fixate on the word “world” because they think it gives them a free will. In fact, back around the time when we first started having a web page, there was an online fag publication called “Whosoever.” The word in the original Greek happens to be “pas”, which means “all.” This verse is simply stating a fact about “all the believers.” And the fact is that every single human being who has ever lived, without exception, who believes in Christ, will not perish but have everlasting life. I said it before, and I’ll say it again: this particular verse, John 3:16, says nothing about what causes a person to believe, who will and won’t believe, or why some people believe and some people don’t believe. In short, the verse says nothing about whether or not you have a free will in the matter of believing in Christ – those answers are found in other verses. Which brings us to the next word:

Believeth – Believing is nothing less than a supernatural gift from God that involves you putting aside your works-righteousness and having faith that Christ, and Christ alone, saves. It is necessarily believing the whole counsel of God, including that record that God gave of His Son, and all of the doctrines contained in the Bible. On this point, most people who claim to be Christians agree that the only ones who will go to heaven are those who believe. The difference is, most people who say that they are Christians teach that everyone has the power to believe (that is, they believe in free will). At this church, on the other hand, we teach what the whole context actually says - that those who are born again are the only ones who can believe. He has made us willing. “Thy people *shall be* willing in the day of thy power.” (Psalm 110:3). Nobody else has the ability or the will to believe. Please refer to “They could not believe” (John 12:39) and several similar verses that I quoted earlier in this sermon. You can’t

understand what is happening in this verse unless you understand what the rest of the scripture teaches, and the rest of the scripture teaches that faith is a gift of God, and He doesn't give it to everyone. It is only given to those who are born again. Some are born of the Spirit and they believe; some are not born of the Spirit and they do not believe. Believing is the effect, not the cause, of God's sovereign election.

“Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17)

“And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith.” (Luke 17:5)

“The hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.” (Acts 11:21)

“And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” (Acts 13:48)

“And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard *us*: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” (Acts 16:14)

“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of *himself* more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.” (Romans 12:3)

“For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake;” (Philippians 1:29)

“Without me ye can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

And we can't forget this:

“So then *it is* not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.” (Romans 9:16)

“But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, *even* to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13)

Robert Haldane has a few good words here: *“Jesus Christ knew from the beginning who they were that would believe and who would not believe, because He knew who they were whom the Father had given Him and would draw unto Him. And it is this eternal decree which He*

here shows is the rule of God's calling, according to which the Son is or is not revealed: 'Ye believe not, because ye are not of My sheep, as I said unto you.'"

Any language in John 3 that sounds like universal language regarding God's love and who is saved must be restricted to only those who believe. This passage of scripture clearly is talking about the same two groups of human beings that we read about through the rest of the Bible. "Whoever **believeth** in Him." "He that **believeth** on Him." "He that **believeth not** is condemned already." "He hath **not believed** in the name of the only begotten Son of God." There are two classes of people here: believers vs. non-believers. Sheep vs. goats. Jacob vs. Esau. Elect vs. reprobate. Children of the promise vs. children of bondage. Children of light vs. children of disobedience and wrath. Abel vs. Cain. The spiritual man vs. the natural man. Those that are born of the Spirit vs. those that are born of the flesh. etc.

As mentioned before, if you understand all of that, then you would understand that not only does John 3:16 not teach universal atonement, but it is one of the strongest verses in all of the Bible to teach limited atonement. It is limited only to believers. The point of the verse is to say it doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, what your state is in life...as long as you have faith to believe that Christ is the only way to be saved from certain destruction, you have passed from death to life (see John 5:24). This promise is only for those who believe.

Perish - This word means utterly destroyed or ruined. It is talking about going to hell, which we know because it is compared to "everlasting life." There is a certain heresy that is quite popular that teaches that wicked people are annihilated (that is, reduced to non-existence), and they use this word "perish" here as proof. The problem is that the word doesn't mean that (not to mention the fact that the rest of the Bible teaches otherwise). A thing can be destroyed without being reduced to non-existence. We have ruins across the globe that prove this point. Entire cities that have been destroyed, but are still there in ruins that you can go visit. And who causes these unbelievers to perish? Who destroys them? Who sends them to hell? God. "Fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28). Again, the same God who loves is the God who causes the reprobate to perish.

Everlasting life – As noted above, we're talking about heaven and hell here. We're not talking about some temporal punishment or gift from God – we're talking about eternity. And just in case the phrase "everlasting life" isn't strong enough for you, the literal translation is "keep on having everlasting life." It will never end, and we can never lose it:

"This is the promise that he hath promised us, *even* eternal life." (1 John 2:25)

And please note how tightly interwoven this everlasting life is with our belief in God, and how the fountainhead of it all is the eternal decrees and predestination of God. This verse says that

those who believe will have eternal life. And Acts 13:48 says that those who were ordained to eternal life will believe.

To finish up, I'd like to briefly go over verses 17-21:

“For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.” (John 3:17-21)

Our brother Sam went over some of this last week, so I won't dwell on it. Every once in a while, you'll find a person who will actually quote you verse 17 along with verse 16. But it almost always stops there. Nobody likes verses 18-21. Verse 17 is more of a description of what the intention of God the Father was in sending His Son into the earth. He was sent not to condemn the world at that time, although He could have justly come to destroy us all. He came to save the world (that is, believers from every nation, whether Jew or Gentile). This “might be saved” language sounds like there's only a possibility of being saved. That's not what it means. It means that He came with a purpose, and the purpose was that they should be saved. Remember, God's purposes are unchangeable and unfrustrable.

We are all, by nature, already condemned in Adam. The only people who are not condemned are God's elect (that is, those who believe; those who were ordained to eternal life), and that by virtue of Christ. The only reason we are not condemned is because of that great love of God in sending Christ to earth for the purpose of saving us. We are now in Christ and there is no condemnation for us:

“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” (Romans 8:1)

Those people who are reprobates (that is, those who will never believe) are already condemned. They are walking dead men, just waiting for their sentence to be executed. He will return, and their sentence will be executed (see Acts 17:31). And they are justly condemned, because they love their evil deeds and hate the light (i.e., Christ and all of His doctrines). They will do whatever they can do to keep the light from shining. Conversely, His elect (that is, those who believe), love the light, come to the light, and understand that any good works that they have are not from themselves, but are “wrought in God.” Amen.