

## **If God Loves the World, Why Isn't Everyone Saved?**

John 3:17–21

Studies in John #8

**J**ESUS saves! Do you believe this? Do you realize what you are saying when you say “Jesus saves?” Jesus—the eternal Son of God who entered our world and took upon himself humanity—saves. Saves—those who are lost in the darkness and left for dead on the way to eternity Jesus brings light and life. What a comfort this statement is for those who believe! What a challenge to those who think they’re good or who do not need a Savior. Jesus saves.

Here in John 3 Jesus has been having a conversation with the Jewish religious leader Nicodemus. Jesus declared to him as a Jew, as a Judean Jew, as a Pharisee, and as a member of the Sanhedrin in all his spiritual elitism that he must be completely changed to enter God’s kingdom but that he couldn’t do this himself. Because Nicodemus was confused Jesus declared it a second way: unlike prophets who ascended into heaven to receive a message from God then descended to deliver it, the Son as God first descended to declare the Father’s will because he’s always been in heaven in the fellowship of the Father (1:18); on one day he’ll ascend via the cross so that all those who look up to him in faith like snake bitten Israelites looked up at the bronze serpent will be saved.

I want you recognize that this was what *Jesus* said in verses 1–15. Beginning with that fundamental declaration of the mission of God and the mission of the Son in verse 16, *John* is now explaining how this mission impacts the world through verse 21. This is a typical pattern in John where he records Jesus' words then his own Spirit-inspired reflections. Remember in chapter 2 Jesus speaks and turns water into wine then John reflects on this saying it was Jesus' first sign that revealed his glory. Then Jesus cleanses the temple and John reflects on what he meant saying it was all about his body being raised. That same pattern is found here in John 3. Even more is the fact that in verse 14 Jesus speaks for himself as the "Son of Man," which only he uses in the Gospels, while in verses 16 and 18 John calls him "the only Son" (*monogenes*), which he's used previously in 1:14 and 1:18 and which Jesus never uses of himself. Also, with verse 16 John is speaking in the past tense: "God so *loved* the world that he *sent* his only Son."<sup>1</sup>

God so loved the world; but if he does, why isn't everyone saved? That's really the big question here. Let's dive in.

### **SENT TO SAVE**

God loved the world that he gave his only Son. What was his mission? **For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.** John sets up a contrast to

say the Son was SENT TO SAVE. Why did God send the Son to this dark and dead world? He sent him not to condemn but to save the world. It's interesting that by saying **God...sen[t] his Son *into the world*** he's distinguishing the Son's being sent into the world from the world that is to come from John the Baptist's sending in 1:6; John was already in the world; the Son comes to it.

At this point in the history of God's saving plan being worked out the Son comes first to save. Later when this plan is complete he will come to condemn in judgment. Turn over to chapter 12:46–48:

I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.

But doesn't Jesus say in 5:27 that God gave him authority to judge as the Son of Man? More importantly, doesn't Jesus say in 9:39, "For judgment I have come into the world?" The word that's used here in verse 17 is translated in chapters 5 and 9 as "judge;" but here it's in contrast to **save** so it's speaking of ultimate condemnation. More importantly, the Son came to a world already condemned. He didn't need to pronounce that.<sup>2</sup> He will when he comes again. Now, he was sent to save.

But doesn't John say here that the Son was sent **in order that the world might be saved through him**? **Might** is not expressing a desire or a wish as we understand it. It's expressing a definite action to save. The grammatical clause is a purpose clause; it's not a conditional clause. The NIV helpfully translates it as "to save the world through him." Jesus was sent to save because God loved the world in sending him.<sup>3</sup>

## **TWO RESPONSES**

God loved the world and Jesus saves. So why aren't all saved? The Bible has a lot more to say about God's eternal purpose, but our text focuses on the great tragedy that God loved the world and gave the world his Son to save but not all receive that salvation; not all love God in return! There are **TWO RESPONSES** to the Son's salvation described in verse 18. You know them well.

The first response is faith: **whoever believes in him is not condemned**. John is describing faith as doing what Paul says faith does: "Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1); "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). What peace! It's with God! What assurance! We have it now! Who wouldn't respond in faith to God's love in Jesus Christ that

removes condemnation and grants justification; that removes fear and grants assurance?

But that's the reality, isn't it? We hear it in verse 18; we see it everyday: **but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world** as verse 17 said because prior to their even being conscious unbelievers, those in the world are **condemned already**. If you do not yet believe in Jesus Christ this means you are under God's condemnation right now, which is bad enough, and you will certainly be condemned for eternity. In his love God sent his Son to the world to save; he's sending him again in his wrath to judge those already under condemnation. Jesus is like a lamb now, offered up for the sins of sinners; but when he comes again it'll be like a lion, to devour his enemies. Maybe you don't realize this. So I'm telling you now! You have nothing to look forward to after you die except an eternity of fearful suffering because of your unbelief. God commands you now to turn from unbelief and believe in Jesus Christ!

“But don't you Reformed churches believe that God chooses who's saved and who's not, so it doesn't matter what you do?” Absolutely we do *not* believe that! Jesus himself will get into God's eternal purpose and how it

relates to faith later in chapter 6, for example, but we believe what this text says: Jesus saves, no one is automatically saved, faith is necessary to receive salvation. This text has been blowing my mind all week. As we saw last week, verse 16 is describing the general love God has for the **world** of human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike. Then in verse 17 he says God sent his Son **into the world**, which is the actual fallen **world** in which everyone lives. Then he says the Son didn't come to condemn this **world** of fallen sinners but to save it through him. Yet not all are saved because some are already condemned while others believe. This **world** is distinguished into believers and unbelievers. That's what we see; that's what we know. God sees and knows what he sees, but we're to be concerned with unbelievers believing because what they do or don't do now determines their stance before the Judge on the last day. It's like the rising of the sun. It rises not to cast a shadow, but to cast light. Yet, one consequence of light are shadows. In the same way the Son came to bring salvation. But one consequence is that there is now and will be in the end condemnation for those who live in the shadow of darkness.

## **TWO REASONS**

Jesus came to save. But there are two responses to him: faith and unbelief. Then John delves even deeper into this mystery of why not all are saved with TWO REASONS for these two responses of belief and unbelief.

The reason for unbelief is stated first in verses 19–20. **And this is the judgment** (v. 19). John changes his word meaning the ultimate verdict of condemnation to a word that expresses the process that leads to that condemnation (*krisis*). And here is that process: **the light** whom we saw in chapter 1 is the eternal Word and Son **has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil**. Like cockroaches that flee from light back into darkness! When he says **people loved the darkness** he uses a tense (aorist) that expresses that they set their love on the darkness. Why did they do this? **Because their works were evil**. Notice the cyclical sickness of unbelief: unbelievers are under condemnation because they love the darkness, and they love that darkness because they do evil works. In other words, the reason for the response of unbelief is that the world is dead in sin. Isn't this what Paul says in Romans 1? God's wrath is already being poured out upon the unbeliever who knows God exists and knows right from wrong because God has implanted that knowledge on the conscience. Yet the unbeliever seeks to suppress that knowledge so they can go on living in wickedness. Look at John 3:20: **For everyone who does wicked things hates<sup>4</sup> the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed**. Unbelievers want to hide their conviction and shame in the dark. Like mold

that grows in the dark, unbelief loves the darkness of this sinful world because that's where it grows.

But being an unbeliever is not a fate you cannot escape. This is one of the ways Jesus' teaching was so different than the strict Jewish community who lived in the wilderness caves in Qumran. They were fatalistic: you're either in darkness or light and that was that. But Jesus in verse 15 and John in verses 16 and following says all who come out of unbelief and believe will be saved. There is real moral choice in Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

Then John gives the reason for the response of belief in verse 21: **But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.** It's important to see that there's not a strict parallelism between the evil of the evildoer in verse 20 and the truth of the truth-doer in verse 21. Grammatically **wicked things** is indeterminate **what is true** is definite and speaks of **the truth** in Jesus. This means there's a point when an person whose life is described as being an evildoer does the truth in the sense of believing in Jesus' revelation. Also, the evildoer hides so he's not shamed; the doer of truth doesn't put forward his truth doing, but is shown ultimately to do this "in or through God."<sup>6</sup> Like a vine, which grows towards the light of the sun.

And this brings us full circle: if God loves the world by sending his Son to save, why isn't everyone saved? Because this salvation must be received by faith and some refuse to receive it. Why? John's answer is the darkness of sin. And this brings us back to what Jesus told Nicodemus: you must be radically changed by God himself to enter God's kingdom. And what God wants me to tell you is to embrace Jesus and be embraced by him, get to know him more and more by following him in this life, and more and more come to realize how bad your sinfulness really is and how great his forgiveness is even greater.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus also doesn't speak of God as *ho theos*. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 203; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 206–207. Morris seeks reconciliation in that salvation *does* imply judgment. *The Gospel According to John*, 231–232.

<sup>3</sup> On the *hina* clause + subjunctive mood verb, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 471–474.

<sup>4</sup> John uses this verb 12 times, almost 1/3 of all NT uses.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 234.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 207–208.