

# God So Loved

John 3:11-21

## The Life and Teaching of Christ

One of the most romantic scenes I have ever beheld was to be at a wedding in Colchester, Essex, England which took place in a beautiful, old church. The most memorable moment was when the bride started to walk up the aisle; the bridegroom began to sing a love song to her as she walked toward him. What a beautiful thing it was to witness this most tender of moments between a man and a woman, the bride being completely surprised at the bridegroom's initiation of such a romantic act of love.

*Warm-up question: What's the most loving or romantic thing you've ever heard about or witnessed?*

God Himself has taken the initiative to reach out from Heaven to Earth to call us, His bride, to come away with Him as in a marriage relationship. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells us the story of a God who so loves Mankind that He goes to extraordinary lengths to reach across the great divide to woo us back to Him from the fall in the Garden of Eden. The end book of the Bible, Revelation, speaks of the saints of God, those brought into relationship with Him through being born-again, coming down from heaven as a city:

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, **prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband**. And I heard a voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:2-3 Emphasis mine).

This same thought of the Church being the bride of Christ is also mentioned by Paul in his ministry of teaching and preparing the Church for marriage, he says: “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (2 Corinthians 11:2). God reveals to man that only through a substitutionary sacrifice can this union with God be attained. An innocent lamb must die in man's place in order for His people to be redeemed, or bought back, from slavery (Exodus 12:3-13). Later on, in the wilderness wandering, God

showed the Israelites that the only way that man could be cleansed of his sin, and approach this Holy God, was through the shed blood of an animal sacrificed on his behalf (Exodus 29:44-45). All the sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament were but a foreshadow of the most self-sacrificial act of love that has ever been witnessed in the whole universe. That is a Holy God becoming man and willingly, lovingly, laying down his life as an offering, in full payment of the penalty that our sins deserve. The greatest lover in the world has come to capture our hearts through the greatest act of love the world has ever seen, the terrible death of Christ on the cross of Calvary. If that is not enough, He then completes this greatest of all acts of love by making it available to the greatest amount of people who receive it with the greatest amount of simplicity. It is a finished work and nothing can be added or done on our part but to receive this greatest of all gifts. Let's continue to read the interchange between Jesus and Nicodemus, our main passage that we are studying, which explains the gift of God and how it is bestowed on those who respond to him by faith:

<sup>11</sup> I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it

may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God” (John 3:11-21).

In the last session, (Verses 1-10), we read about Nicodemus’ search to find out the answers to life’s difficult questions; how can a man be righteous before God, and how is this righteousness acquired? When Jesus tells him that he must be born from above or born again, he responds by saying, “How can this be? (John 3:9). Today we will look at this passage in greater detail. First though, let’s focus on a key word in this passage:

*Which word is found seven times in these 11 verses? What is so important about this word that it is repeated so many times?*

The very important Greek word is *Pisteuō*, translated with the English word believe. It means to believe in, have faith in, and to trust in the truthfulness of someone.<sup>1</sup> Allow me to give you a word picture here to describe this kind of trust. Picture the Lord Jesus coming to the castle of a man’s life, waiting for the drawbridge to open for His entrance. On the battlements above “Castle Mansoul,” stand three persons who must together make the decision to allow Him in. Conscience speaks up first. He says to the others, “We are in trouble for we have definitely broken His laws and stand guilty of rebellion.” Secondly, the mind speaks up, saying, “His free offering of a pardon, if we open the drawbridge, is more than we could ever hope for. We really should open to Him.” It is only the third person who has the power to open the gates, he is called Will. Will takes counsel from the others and he alone has the hand on the drawbridge lever. Christ will never force His way into our lives. God has given to us the gift of freewill. To believe and receive Christ is an act of the will, not mental assent to the facts of the gospel. There is often a battle that goes on within a person’s soul when he is confronted with the claims and gospel of Christ. The enemy of our souls whispers to the mind all kinds of questions in an attempt to persuade the will not to open the drawbridge. We can choose or not choose to lower the drawbridge and allow Christ to come into our lives and rule over Castle Mansoul. To believe is an act of the will, after taking into account the witness of the mind and conscience. Man reaches out with the hand of faith to connect with God, believing that God is true to His word, and that if he submits his will and trusts by faith, he is born again. Once this decision is made to aban-

don one’s life to Christ, He promises that He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5), but one has to decide to take up his cross daily and follow Him (Luke 9:23). It is a matter of the will to continually walk in God’s ways. We enter into a battle that is with us for the rest of our lives. Our mind becomes the battleground. Battles are fought and won, or lost, depending upon the decisions we make. Some battles we will lose to temptation, but I trust that as you and I grow in maturity, we will be able to overcome temptation more and more as we receive grace from God. There is provision from the Lord Jesus that even when we fall into sin, if we repent and ask for His forgiveness, we are restored to fellowship with Him (1 John 1:9).

*Do you remember going through a battle within your mind before you made your decision to trust Christ? Discuss. If you do not feel that you have made this decision yet, what do you think is holding you back?*

Be aware that the mind is the place of a spiritual battle that is raging. The enemy of your soul would like you to believe that your thoughts are yours alone. This is not true. The word of God, typified by Jesus as seed in the Parable of the Sower, is sown into the field of our hearts (Luke 8:4-15), but in the Parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-26), we also see an enemy sowing his seeds in fertile soil. I see the heart as representative of the core part of man’s inner make up, his spirit, mind, will and emotions (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The enemy also sows his seed in the field of your mind. Not all the thoughts you have originate in your mind only. There are also spiritual sources. Thoughts that are sown in the field of your heart and mind are from three different sources; God, satan, and our own thoughts. What you allow to grow there and the decisions you make from the cultivated thoughts you think is what you become. To believe is a conscious choice to submit to Christ all you have and all that you are. You are no longer your own, you have been bought with a price, the shed blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20).

In the beginning of this study we talked about God’s plan for establishing a union between Himself and man, and the need for this plan to be understood and received with the greatest of simplicity. Many people have difficulty with the simplicity of the Gospel. They reason that something as important as man’s eternal destiny must be difficult to attain. They feel it must be some-

<sup>1</sup> Key Word Study Bible, AMG publishers, Study of 4409, *Pisteuō*, Page 1662.

thing that is gained only through hard work and effort, or they see it as an elusive mystery that one cannot be sure of.

<sup>29</sup> This only have I found: God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes” (Ecclesiastes 7:29).

Man invents all kind of schemes to relieve or lessen the conviction of his heart. There are many false religions that tell us that if we work hard at climbing the ladder of works, at the end of our lives we will make it. How good is good enough? Even Nicodemus admitted that the righteousness of being one of the 6000 Pharisee’s, one of the 70 Elders of Israel, and the Teacher of the nation was not good enough! Jesus had a clear message for those who would seek to work hard at earning salvation:

<sup>28</sup> Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:28-29).

God has made the greatest gift to be received with the greatest simplicity, and He made this gift available to ALL who believe. He said that God has made it so simple that children, with a limited amount of knowledge on the subject, can receive the free gift of salvation. In fact, He said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:17).

*What lessons on faith can we learn from children? Why should we approach the kingdom of God as a little child?*

Children can teach us a few things here, for children simply believe and trust what their parents tell them. When my son was a little toddler, barely able to walk, he would jump into my arms, never once fearing that he may fall or even looking down to see how far down the floor was. It’s only when we get older that we want to understand everything before we jump into our Father’s arms.

Jesus reminded Nicodemus of a story that illustrated the simplicity of believing and trusting that a man can be born again by looking to the finished work of Christ on the cross: 14Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the

desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15). Let’s take a closer look at the passage in the book of Numbers that He refers to and see what we can learn:

<sup>4</sup> They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; <sup>5</sup> they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” <sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived (Numbers 21:4-9).

*What was the result of their complaining against God? What two things were they told to do in order to appropriate their healing and how is this similar to what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus?*

We are told that many Israelites died (Verse 6). I wonder how many of those died because they refused to receive and follow the simple provision which had been given to them. The answer for their salvation was right there in front of them, but like some of us today, perhaps they overlooked the provision because it was too simple. Some people, I am sure, could not get their minds around the simplicity of just a look in the right direction to a bronze snake on a pole. The reasoning mind would say, “How on earth can I be healed by just looking at a bronze serpent on a stick?” The snake is a symbol of sin, whereas bronze was the symbol of judgment being the same metal that the sacrificial alter was made of. The picture is that sin has been judged and the one that looks with faith to the picture of sin being judged received healing. The analogy is typical because the Bible says that, “God made Him who had no sin **to be sin for us**, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). He took our place and sin was judged by God at Calvary. That is why Christ cried out from the cross; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mark 15:34). When Christ hung on the cross, sin was judged in Him. He was the

sacrificial substitute and the redeeming lamb. We are to look to Him with the eyes of faith to be healed from the painful bite of the serpent.

God's ways are higher than our ways. If He has made it as simple as repenting and looking to the cross, why will we not believe and trust Him? Isaiah, the prophet, spoke of the simplicity of being saved with just a look: "**Look unto me**, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isaiah 45:22. King James Version. Emphasis mine).

The above scripture was used by God to win Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher. He was caught in a snow storm just around the corner from where I lived for a time in Colchester, Essex, England. Not being able to get to his normal church, he stopped in at a little chapel on the way. The normal speaker did not manage to get to church that day so one of the elders of the church got up and spoke very simply that one needed to only look with a fixed, faithful gaze at the Savior on the cross. C.H. Spurgeon had been trying to work hard at his salvation and was convinced of the simple truth of looking to the cross. He was born again in that chapel at the tender age of 16 and soon was preaching before huge audiences by the time he was 19 years old.

I can't explain how a look to the Savior on a cross takes away my sin; I just believe it and my life is changed by the power of God. The gospel is the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). Don't try to figure everything out before taking that step of heart and soul commitment to Him. Just abandon all into His hands like a little child!

*Why does God make it so easy for people to be saved? What are some of the stumbling blocks that people have in understanding the simplicity of the Gospel?*

God's motive in making it so easy to be saved is so that the maximum amount of people will turn to Him and be saved. The Bible tells us that, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, **not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance**" (2 Peter 3:9 Emphasis mine). God's motive is love and concern for the place He sees us in. He sees us as bound in sin and under spiritual deception of the enemy.

The enemy, seeking to keep us from being reconciled to God, plants within our mind a picture of God as an angry father, seeking to punish us at every opportunity, but the truth is the very opposite:

<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16-17).

God so loved you and me that He gave His one and only Son. If there was another way for man to be reconciled to God, don't you think He would have taken it? If reconciliation could have been accomplished by keeping laws and regulations and being good, God certainly would not have put His Son through such a painful death. We are told that God so loved that He gave, the word so is added for emphasis. God didn't just love, He so loved you and me that He endured watching His Son being brutalized and murdered at the hands of evil men. Whose hands did this to Him? Yours and mine, yes, those who wielded the whips and those who shouted, "Crucify Him" will certainly be judged unless they too received His forgiveness, but it was my sin and your sin that brought Christ to the cross. The separation at death and Hell that I deserved for my sins, He took upon Himself. The problem was that upon death, I would "perish" (Verse 16) without a Savior. A person who does not believe, does not look to the Cross of Christ, shall perish without a Savior. He does not want that any should perish but that all may come to repentance. The English word "love" that is used in verse 16, is the Greek word, *Agapaō*. It means to love, cherish, esteem, charity, devotion, respect, loyalty and concern. It is rarely used outside of religious literature, and it is most commonly used to translate the Hebrew word *hesed*, which means mercy<sup>2</sup>. *Agape* is a word to describe self sacrificial love, a love that is volitional or a choice or decision made by the will of a person. The death of Christ is God's provision for you to draw close to God, and having His help in your day to day life as you look to Him. The barrier of sin is taken out of the way by the death of a substitute on your behalf. I want to share a story which I think will illustrate the kind of love we are talking about:

In his book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon tells the true story of a group of Prisoners of

<sup>2</sup> Key Word Study Bible, AMG publishers, 26 *Agapaō*, Page 1571.

War working on the Burma Railway during World War II. At the end of each day the tools were collected from the work party. On one occasion, a Japanese guard shouted that a shovel was missing and demanded to know which man had taken it. He began to rant and rave, working himself up into a fury and ordered whoever was guilty to step forward. No one moved. All die! All die! He shrieked, cocking and aiming his rifle at the prisoners. At that moment one man stepped forward and the guard clubbed him to death with his rifle while he stood silently at attention. When they returned to the camp, the tools were counted again and no shovel was missing. The Japanese soldier had miscounted. That one man had gone forward as a substitute to save the others.

God was in Christ, reconciling the world, you and me, back to Himself. He so loved us that He gave Himself for us. When I first heard that God loved me personally it was the greatest news I had ever heard! Why hadn't anybody told me this before! I couldn't believe that I had wandered over the world to find the answer to life's questions and there was nobody who had ever told me this in my home town. I lost my mom when I was five years old. I had never heard the words, "I love you." There was a yearning in my heart to be loved for who I am. Like a jigsaw which is not complete until the last missing piece is placed on the board, there was something missing in my life that I just couldn't put my finger on. My heart was broken and melted at the love of God when I met Jesus Christ. I remember leaving the place where I became a Christian, and travelling down to Florida on a Greyhound bus reading the book, *Hind's Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hurnard. I wept many tears as I discovered more of how God had been on my tail. He had never left me since I had cried out to Him after an overdose and nearly dying. For around five years I had been on a spiritual search to find the truths that I eventually was told. I heard the message and was born again and found that I was loved by God. I was, and am, amazed that He could love someone like me, an ex-drug addict and fisherman. There was and is nothing special about me, but He loved me all the same, and He loves you too. No matter what you've done or where you've been, He loves you. Come to Him; experience His personal love for you! He saw our need to be born again, to have the life of God renewing us and filling us, and the only one who could, gave His life to

pay the ransom price to set us free from Satan's slave market of sin. Whoever believes this has everlasting life (Verse 16).

*If we have received eternal life, what do we have? What is meant by the phrase eternal life?*

Eternal life is more than experiencing the life that we now have forever, it is life at a whole new level. It is life as God intended. A Christ centered life. A life that is Spirit led by agape love. When we receive Christ, we are forgiven and set in right standing with God on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross. There is nothing to add to it, it cannot be earned, it can only be received as a gift of God. This life begins at the reception of sincerely asking Christ to come into our lives, and upon our repentance of sin. We don't have to wait until we die for eternal life to be manifest in our lives, it begins upon our being born from above or born again.

Jesus then goes on to say, <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (John 3:18).

This is very sobering because Jesus is saying that there is no other rescue plan. He is saying that if we don't believe the testimony of the scriptures concerning Christ's death on our behalf, we will perish. Jesus says that the condemnation is that a person who does not believe, that is, trust in Christ, is already condemned. There are only two kingdoms in this world, the kingdom of satan and the kingdom of God. Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). If we are not one of His by being born again of the Spirit, we are still residents of satan's camp (Colossians 1:13). Jesus finishes the passage by saying, "whoever lives by the truth comes into the light" (Verse 21). I interpret that to be saying that everyone who has an honest heart and wants to live a life honoring to God will come to the truth, when he hears it. A man who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light, because his deeds are evil (Verse 20). Will you give Him your life? Will you choose to come into the light?

Prayer: Father, help me to choose day by day to follow you with the simplicity of a child. As a young child trusts, help me to trust you with all my heart. I choose to believe that you have the best in mind for me.

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