

6. God So Loved

John 3:11-21

I'm New to This

Born-Again into a Marriage Relationship

God Himself took the initiative to call a body of people to enter into a marriage relationship. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells the story of the Creator God Who so loves humanity that He went to extraordinary lengths to make a way back to Him from the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden. The Book of Revelation speaks of those forgiven by God through Christ's substitutionary death brought into a marriage relationship with the Messiah (Christ), and coming down from heaven as a bride and 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 the Apostle: "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). In the Old Testament, God used the picture of an innocent Passover lamb dying in man's place for His people to be released from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:3-13). Later in the wilderness wandering, God showed the Israelites that the only way that God could cleanse humanity of sin and for them to approach God was through the shed blood of a substitutionary animal sacrificed on his behalf (Exodus 29:44-45).

All the sacrifices for sin in the Old Testament foreshadowed the most self-sacrificial act of love witnessed in the whole universe. God became a Man to willingly and lovingly lay down His life as an offering in full payment of the penalty of death that our sins deserved. We are purchased from slavery to sin and Satan by the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb that was slain without spot or wrinkle (1 Peter 1:19).

The Greatest Lover in the world came to capture our hearts through the greatest act of love the world has ever seen, i.e., the terrible death of Christ on the cross of Calvary. If that was not enough, God completed this greatest of all acts of love by making it available to the greatest number of people who receive it with the greatest amount of simplicity. It is a finished work, and nothing can be added on our part except to receive this greatest of all gifts. Just as nothing on our part could be done to be born into this world, nothing remains for us to do for our salvation apart from trusting that Christ was crucified for us and as us. This extraordinary grace was what Jesus was explaining to Nicodemus, the Pharisee when he visited the Lord one night. Christ stated emphatically, "You must be born again" (John 3:7). Let's continue to read the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as the Lord explained the gift of God and how it is received by faith:

¹¹I 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. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 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 3:11-15).

The Simplicity of the Gospel

In John 3:1-10, we read about Nicodemus' search to find out the answers to life's difficult questions: how can a man be righteous before God? How is this righteousness acquired? When Jesus told him that he must be born from above or born again, he responded by saying, "How can this be?" (John 3:9). His mind was trained from birth to think only in terms of the things of this world. The Lord gave him a simple analogy of being born into this world, i.e., that nothing could be done by each of us to be born of flesh; likewise, we can do nothing to earn being born again spiritually. If a simple analogy of how a man is born on earth could not be seen by Nicodemus, how can he see deeper spiritual truths if Jesus started talking to him of heavenly things? (v. 12). This view is similar to what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church:

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Nicodemus, a man in the highest echelon of education and at the head of his profession as a teacher of Israel, has a hard time understanding the things Christ is teaching him! It reminds us that we are to be people who search the Scriptures and do not take the word of men as final truth—some men, even with all their training, are not capable of understanding spiritual things unless the Holy Spirit opens their minds. To open his understanding and show Nicodemus just how simple God has made salvation, the Lord took his mind back into Israel's history. He reminded him of when God used a simple glance at a bronze serpent on a wooden pole to teach them about faith (v. 14).

Let's take a closer look at the passage in the book of Numbers to which Christ refers and see what we can learn:

⁴They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; ⁵they 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!" ⁶Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷The 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. ⁸The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." ⁹So 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).

Question 1) What did God command them to do to appropriate (receive) their healing, and how is this similar to what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus?

The Scriptures say that many Israelites died because of the poisonous snakes (v. 6). Interestingly, God did not tell them to capture a live snake and nail it to the pole, for then that would symbolize each of us dying for our own sin. The Lord did not tell them to go out with swords to kill the snakes, nor did He require them to go to the pole in case they were too weak. There was no energy of the flesh involved at all. He did not tell them of some medicine that would heal the snake bites. They didn't have to go and serve others and so earn their healing. No, thank God for those who serve, but the source of their healing was obedience to the Word of God to a simple look of faith. I wonder how many of them died because they refused to follow the simple instruction and provision. The answer for their salvation was right there in front of them, but like some of us today, they perhaps overlooked God's provision because it was too simple.

I am sure that some people could not get their minds around the simplicity of looking away from themselves to the bronze snake on a pole in the middle of the camp. There may have been some who said, "How on earth can I be healed by just looking at a bronze serpent on a pole?" The snake symbolizes sin and bronze is the symbol of judgment. (The sacrificial alter was made of bronze.) The picture here is a story beautiful in simplicity. Sin has been judged, and the one who looks with faith to the picture of judged sin receives healing. The analogy is typical because Paul the Apostle, in speaking of Christ, wrote, "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). God judged sin by Christ's taking the judgment on Himself. 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, our 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 then will we not believe and trust Him? Isaiah the prophet also 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 KJV). God used that Scripture to illuminate the way of salvation for Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher. He was caught in a snowstorm on his way to church in Colchester, Essex, England in 1850, and not being able to get to his traditional church, he stopped in at a little chapel on the way. The pastor of that chapel did not manage to get to church that day, so one of the church's elders got up and spoke very simply that one needed only to look with a fixed, faithful gaze at the Savior on the cross and quote Isaiah 45:22. Spurgeon described the experience saying that the preacher that day "was obliged to stick to his text for the simple reason that he had little else to say. He did not pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said. I did not take much notice of it. I was so possessed by that one thought. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, 'Look!' what a charming word it seemed to me... There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood

of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, ‘Trust Christ, and you shall be saved.’”¹

Charles Spurgeon was trying to earn 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 sixteen and soon was preaching before huge audiences by the time he was nineteen years old. (At one time, I happened to live right around the corner from where that chapel stood, in Colchester, Essex.)

I can’t explain how a look to the Savior on a cross takes away my sin; I just believe it, and the power of God changed my life. 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 your all into His hands like a little child!

God's motive in making it easy to be saved is so that the maximum number of people will turn to Christ, repent, and be saved. The Bible tells us, “**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 our plight. He sees us in Satan's slave market, bound in sin and under the spiritual deception of the enemy. All God requires is the look of faith toward the cross, the place of judgment of sin.

Question 2) What does it mean to believe the Good News? Is salvation an intellectual acceptance of the facts, or is it more than that? What do you think it means to believe in your heart?

What Does It Mean to Believe? (John 3:15)

The English word *believe* is a translation from the Greek word *Pisteuō*. The word means to believe in, have faith in, and trust in the truthfulness of someone.² To illustrate this concept, 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 that is completely locked up with the drawbridge closed to stop His entrance. On the battlements above “Castle Mansoul” stand three who must decide whether or not to allow Christ to enter. Conscience speaks up first. He says to the others, “We are in trouble, for we have broken the laws of the land, and we stand guilty of rebellion.” Secondly, the mind speaks up, saying, “His offering of a free pardon if we open the drawbridge is more than we could ever hope. We really should open to Him.” The truth is that only the third person has the power to open the gates. The third part of our inner nature is called our *Will*. *Will* takes counsel from the others, but he alone has the hand on the drawbridge lever. Christ will never force His way into our lives. God has given us the gift of free will. To believe and receive Christ is an act of the will, not just a mental acceptance of the facts of the Gospel.

There is often a battle that goes on within a person’s soul when one is confronted with the claims of Christ. The enemy whispers to our mind all kinds of questions in an attempt to persuade a person not to open the drawbridge. We alone decide whether or not to lower the drawbridge and allow Christ to come into our lives and rule our "Castle Mansoul." To believe is an act of the will.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-29/spurgeons-conversion.html>

² Spiros Zodhiates, *Key Word Study Bible*, AMG Publishers, Study of 4409, *Pisteuō*, Page 1662.

After considering the witness of the mind and conscience, a man or woman reaches out with the hand of faith to connect with God, believing that God is faithful to His Word. If a person submits their will and, by faith, will trust in what Christ has done at the cross, they are born again or born spiritually from above. Once the decision is made to abandon 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 walk in God's ways continually. We enter into a battle against the dark spiritual forces of this world that is with us for the rest of our lives.

Be aware that the mind is where the spiritual battle is fought. The enemy of your soul would like you to believe that your thoughts have their source in you alone, but this is not true. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus typified the Word of God as seed sown into the field of our hearts (Luke 8:4-15). The enemy is the one stealing the seeds before germination. In the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24-26), we also see an enemy sowing his seeds in fertile soil. The heart is the core of a man's inner being, spirit, mind, will, and emotions (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Not all the thoughts that come to your mind have their source in you. Ideas come from three different sources: God, Satan, and our thoughts. What you allow to grow in the seedbed of your mind and the decisions you make from the cultivated seed thoughts make up your character and the person you will become throughout your life. To believe is a conscious choice to submit to Christ all you have and all you are. When you give your life to Christ, you are no longer your own. You are bought with a price, the shed blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20).

[Question 3\). Have you experienced this kind of battle in your mind? Discuss.](#)

Whoever Believes is Saved

¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16-17).

Nicodemus is shocked to the core by these words because the Lord did not say that God so loved Israel (which He does); instead, He said that God loves the world. It is not only Jews who are called to be saved and enter the kingdom of God, but God's grace is given to "whoever believes" (John 3:16). The religious Jews thought that any who did not keep to the Pharisaic version of the Law of God were a cursed people: **"this mob that knows nothing of the law--there is a curse on them"** (John 7:49). This salvation coming to the whole world has always been the plan of God, even from the beginning promise to Abraham: **"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"** (Genesis 12:3).

From the very beginning, God planned for a body of people, called of God from Israel and all nations. He will not leave any tribe, tongue, or people group out from being part of His worldwide Church. In his vision of the end of the age, John the apostle saw **"a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb"** (Revelation 7:9). For this salvation, we are very thankful to those of the nation of Israel who gave up their lives to bring this good news to us Gentiles. We are spiritually indebted to them (Romans 15:26-27).

John 3:16 tells us about the self-sacrificial love of God. The English word "love" is the Greek word, *Agapaō*. It means to love, cherish, esteem, to have 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 *chesed*, which means loving-kindness or mercy.³ Agape is a word to describe self-sacrificial love, i.e., a voluntary love or decision made by a person's will. God so loved (past tense) that, even while we were still in our sin and rebellious enemies of His, He sent His Son into the world to heal us of our sin against Him. **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)**. The passage goes on to say that God so loved that *He gave*. The kind of love we are talking about gives and gives again, even to His hurt, and to all men everywhere in all nations. The motive for God's giving is His desire that no one may perish and that all would come to repentance. If you ever doubt if God loves you, then take a look at the cross of Christ and see the judgment of God upon sin, but also see the Love of God toward guilty sinners.

God has made the greatest gift to be received with the greatest simplicity, and He made this gift available to ALL who will believe. God has made His salvation so simple that children with limited knowledge on the subject can receive the free gift of salvation. He said, **“I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:17)**. Children can teach us a few things here, for children merely believe and trust what their parents tell them. When my son was a little toddler, barely able to walk, I would seat him in a place that for him was pretty high while I made toast for breakfast. He would stand up there and jump into my arms, never once fearing that he may fall or even looking down to see how far down the floor was. He trusted that I would catch him. When we get older, we want to understand everything before we jump into our Father's arms, but simple faith as a child takes God's Word by faith and jumps into the Father's arms.

God so loved you and me that He gave His one and only Son. If there was another way for a man to be reconciled to God, don't you think He would have taken it? If keeping laws and regulations and being good could have accomplished reconciliation, God certainly would not have put His Son through such a painful death. 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.

Christ A Substitute for Us

Whose hands did this to Christ? Those who wielded the whips and those who shouted, "Crucify Him," will undoubtedly be judged unless they, too, received His forgiveness, but it was my sin and your sin that brought Jesus to the cross. The situation is such that, without a Savior, you and I would “perish” (John 3:16). We have already been condemned. The judgment has already been made against us, and those who are not believers in Christ are prisoners held captive by Satan. There was only one way out, the Son of God must step in and pay the ransom price for all those who will look to the Savior. The barrier of sin is taken out of the way by the death of a substitute on your behalf.

³ Spiros Zodhiates, *Key Word Study Bible*, AMG publishers, 1996, Agapaō, Page 1571.

I want to share a story that I think will illustrate the kind of substitutionary love about which we are talking:

In his book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon tells the World War 2 true story of a group of Prisoners of War forced to work on the Burma Railway by Japanese soldiers. At the end of each day, the soldiers collected the tools from the prisoners. 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.⁴

God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. He so loved you and me that He gave Himself for us. When I first heard that God loved me personally, it was the most significant 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 told me these truths in my hometown. When I was five years old, I lost my mom and had never heard the words, "I love you." There was a yearning in my heart to be loved for who I am rather than for what I can do. Like a jigsaw that is not complete until the last missing piece is placed on the board, something was missing in my life on which I just couldn't put my finger. My heart was broken and melted at the love of God when I met Jesus Christ. I remember leaving where I became a Christian, traveling down to Florida on a Greyhound bus, and reading the book *Hind's Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hurnard. I wept many tears as I discovered how God had been drawing me to Himself. He had never left me since I had cried out to Him after an overdose and nearly died.

For around five years, I had been on a spiritual search to find the truths that I eventually heard. I was, and still am, amazed that God could love someone like me. There was nothing special about me, but God 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 love for you! He saw our need to be born again, to have the life of God renewing us and filling us, and Jesus, the Bridegroom, came to woo us and love us home to Himself. Whoever believes this has everlasting life (v. 16).

Question 4) What is meant by the phrase eternal life, and when does it start?

Eternal life is more than experiencing the life we now have forever; it is life on a whole new level. It is life as God intended, i.e., 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 by the finished work of Christ on the cross. There is nothing to add to it, and we cannot earn it; it can only be received as a gift of God. This life begins when we sincerely ask Christ to come into our lives and repent of sin (change our minds and the direction of our lives). 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.

⁴Ernest Gordon, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Fontana Books, 1973.

Whoever Does Not Believe is Condemned Already

¹⁸Whoever 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. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But 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 3:18-21).

These thoughts are very sobering because Jesus is saying that there is no other rescue plan. If we don't believe the testimony of the Scriptures concerning Christ's death on our behalf, we will perish. Jesus said that a person who does not believe, that is, put their 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 finished the passage by saying, "whoever lives by the truth comes into the light" (v. 21). I interpret that to say that everyone who has an honest heart and wants to live a life honoring God will come to the truth when he hears it. A man who does evil hates the light and will not come to the light because his deeds are evil (v. 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 trust You with all my heart. I choose to believe that You have the best in mind for me. I look to You, my Creator and my Redeemer. With a look, I am choosing to open the door of my life and put my trust in You. Amen!

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