

THE BEST POSSIBLE NEWS

by Ray C. Stedman

The section in the Gospel of John to which we come this morning begins with the world's best known Bible verse. I have been in meetings where people were giving memory verses, and before long someone always stood up and quoted John 3:16, and everybody else said, "Oh, he's given my verse!"

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. {John 3:16 RSV}

There is debate among the scholars as to whether those words were uttered by Jesus or by John the Apostle. It seems to me, however, that the first word of John 3:16, the "for," ties the verse into the verses before it, and these were undoubtedly uttered by Jesus. So our Lord's discourse in response to the questions posed to him by Nicodemus the Pharisee runs clear through Verse 21 of this third chapter of John. Then, beginning with Verse 22, the chapter concludes with a confirming word by John the Baptist, whom John the Apostle again quotes. Verse 36 says:

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him. {John 3:36 RSV}

That verse is very similar to John 3:16. This whole section, therefore, clearly presents two ways of life, two choices we have: there is a belief that results in truly living -- both now and forever -- and there is a disobedience that results in living under the wrath of God -- both now and forever.

The problem with life is, it is the disobedience that seems like fun and it is the belief that often appears hard and unpopular! Perhaps the question most want to ask is, "If God made life, why did he make it so hard to be good and so much fun to be bad?" How many of you would like to hear me answer that? Well, I am not going to! That is a tough one.

Viewed that way, however, it is easy to take the next step, which is to say of God, "God is not fair. What a mean old crab he must be to make life that way! I don't like a God like that." We have all heard people say that. But when people say that, notice how far they have moved from John 3:16. That is not the kind of God that John 3:16 speaks about. John 3:16 does not describe a hard, cruel God who is indifferent to our feelings and our sufferings. Rather it speaks of a God who "so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." God sees the world in a very different light than we do. That very perspective we have about God shows how confused we are in our view of life.

When God looks at our world he sees what we often try to ignore. He sees the hurt in people's lives, the shame that fills their hearts, the misery they are going through. He sees drug-wrecked lives, and those who are bored and feeling the meaninglessness of life. He sees murder, violence, hatred, bitterness and anger. He sees greed, oppression, child abuse, famine, death, tears, depression and fear of every kind.

But he sees more. He sees that all this anguish of life is a direct result of the attempts we are all innocently making to find fulfillment for ourselves. In other words, the agony we suffer results from the choices we make, to pursue fame, riches, power and fulfillment. It comes from the desires we feel to make our own way, to be our own man, and to use others to advance our own purposes. To put it another way, God sees that what we are is the cause of all the agony we feel. He links the two as cause and effect.

But his reaction to that is not one of anger, hatred, or ruthless justice. According to this wonderful verse, God's reaction is compassion. He feels sorry for us. He feels pity toward us. He is moved with love for the whole world, not just the Jews or the white people, the rich people, or whoever. This verse flings its arms around the people of all five continents, all the islands of the sea, all colors, backgrounds and states of life.

God's love and compassion goes out to all. That is what the verse declares. "God so loved the world." That little word "so" is an important word: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son."

Recognize, too, that the word "gave" includes not only the coming of Jesus in the incarnation, but also the crucifixion of our Lord. God, seeing our agony, wanted to do something to relieve it. But it was not easy. It took pain, thirst, blood and death. It took terrible darkness, awful separation and unspeakable shame, when "he who knew no sin was made sin for us" {cf, 2 Cor 5:21} upon the cross. He took our place.

But it did the job. It made a way out. It broke through the awful grip our selfishness has upon us and that causes all the terrible anguish of life. It broke through; it made a way out. That is why this is the best news ever heard among men.

This is the thought that lies behind some of our great hymns. One of my favorites is Charles Wesley's wonderful song,

**And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?**

That is the declaration of John 3:16. No, God does not wait with a stick behind his back when we want to come to him. He is not angry at us. He is not waiting to talk to us first about all the awful things we have done and said in our lives. His arms are open; he is ready to receive us. We can come just as we are.

The father in the story of the prodigal son is the picture of God waiting to receive home those who have strayed away. We are assured of that in Verse 17:

**For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world might
be saved through him. {John 3:17 RSV}**

That verse is a great guideline as to how we ought to talk about the gospel to people who do not know God, to those who are living careless, indifferent, often sinfully wretched lives. We ought not to come shaking our finger at them, pointing out how terrible they are and what evil things they are doing to themselves. We ought to come sensing the agony, the hurt, the inward shame, the loneliness, misery and anguish they are going through. That is the way God feels and that is the way we should feel too.

Paul puts this very beautifully in his second letter to the Corinthians: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them," {2 Cor 5:19 RSV}. That is why, in every vignette we have of Jesus in the gospels where he is dealing with acknowledged, open, blatant sinners, we never hear a word of condemnation. Witness the woman taken in adultery, or the woman at the well of Samaria. She had five husbands and was now living with a man outside of marriage. Jesus was courteous to her. He did not attack her, blame her, or judge her. There is no condemnation.

Of course that does not mean that God is not concerned about our sins. He knows that we cannot be free until something is done about them. Everywhere in Scripture we are reminded that he came to set us free from our sins, not to leave us in them, or to say they do not matter, but to set us free. Yet what he wants us clearly to understand is that our sins do not keep us from coming to him. We can come to God knowing we will be received with a loving touch, a forgiving heart, and open, wide-extended arms.

Years ago I read a moving story about a young man who had quarreled with his father and left home. He continued to keep in touch with his mother, and wanted very badly to come home for Christmas, but he was afraid his father would not allow him. His mother wrote to him and urged him to come home, but he did not feel he could until he knew his father had forgiven him. Finally, there was no time for any more letters. His mother wrote and said she would talk with the father, and if he had forgiven him, she would tie a white rag on

the tree which grew right alongside the railroad tracks near their home, which he could see before the train reached the station. If there was no rag, it would be better if he went on.

So the young man started home. As the train drew near his home; he was so nervous he said to his friend who was traveling with him, "I can't bear to look. Sit in my place and look out the window. I'll tell you what the tree looks like and you tell me whether there is a rag on it or not." So his friend changed places with him and looked out the window. After a bit the friend said, "Oh yes, I see the tree." The son asked, "Is there a white rag tied to it?" For a moment the friend did not say anything. Then he turned, and in a very gentle voice said, "There is a white rag tied to every limb of that tree!" That, in a sense, is what God is saving in John 3:16 and 17. God has removed the condemnation and made it possible to come freely and openly home to him.

But that still leaves a choice to be made. Jesus speaks of that in Verses 18 and following:

He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God. {John 3:18-21 RSV}

Verse 18 says that condemnation does not wait until the end of life. It is already going on. The Bible takes the position that mankind is living under the wrath of God all the time. Psalm 90:9 states it plainly. The wrath of God is the anger, the anguish and the agony we feel as a result of trying to do our own thing. We do not have to wait for wrath. If we do not choose to leave it we remain in it; we are "already condemned," that is the point. If you are traveling on a wrong road and every so often you see a signpost that points the way to the right road, but you persist and go by all those signposts, refusing to take the way back to the right road, then you remain wrong. That is God's view of life.

Why would anybody refuse to return? Why should we not take the way back if It has been opened to us? Verses 19 and 20 give the answer: "...men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." When it says, "Men loved darkness," it does not mean males as opposed to females. Some have read it that way. Even my wife has at times read it that way! But that is not what it means. Nor does it mean, "Some people love darkness rather than light." No, it means everybody does.

This is a universal human reaction. We all dislike being shown to be wrong. I feel that way myself. I do not even want to be corrected in the way I pronounce a word. If you tell me that I have mispronounced a word, and prove from a dictionary that you are right, I will challenge the dictionary! We do not like to be shown to be wrong. This verse is saying that normal human reaction is part of our fallen character. That is why life is so hard to change. Nobody wants to change. Nobody wants to admit he is wrong. When the Republicans are in power they try to convince the Democrats they have been wrong, but they will not admit it. When the Democrats are in power they try to convince the Republicans they have made the wrong choices, but they will not admit it either. Nobody wants to admit wrong. That is why it is so hard to change.

But notice that Verse 21 is a contrast: "But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God," (produced by God, is the meaning there.) That is saying that if we will do (not just say the right words but start doing) the right things, despite our dislike of being shown to be wrong -- if we are willing, in other words, to begin to obey truth even though it means we have to admit we have been wrong -- then we will find ourselves being drawn to Jesus, for he is the Light.

This is a description of a unique phenomenon in life: the choice we make that ultimately brings us to Christ starts with a conviction deep within ourselves that we do not like the way we are. We do not like the way we are living; we want to be different. If we will begin to do something else, to pursue truth at whatever level we find it, we will find ourselves, like a magnet, being drawn to Jesus. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him." That

does not say a word about believing in Jesus or being born again. That takes people right where they are in life and says that if, deep in their hearts, there is a hunger for something more, if they want to be different, if they would like to be freed from the anguish and shame of what they know to be wrong, and they begin to pursue that, they will be drawn like a magnet to Jesus. When they hear of him they will be open to receive him. In Chapter 6 of this same gospel Jesus himself puts it very plainly: "No man can come to me except my Father draw him," {cf, John 6:44}. The feeling of God drawing you is this desire within yourself to want to be set free.

That can come to anybody involved in any kind of evil -- high, respectable, moral evil, or deep, blatant, violent evil -- it does not make any difference. If we want to be free we can be drawn to Jesus. I think Jesus has Nicodemus in mind when he says these words. (He is still talking with Nicodemus.) This must have been a great encouragement to Nicodemus' heart. Here was a Pharisee who prided himself on his sincere and serious efforts to please God, to obey him with punctilious observance of minute regulations, yet he was empty, hurting, and unfulfilled. To do right, Nicodemus chose to risk the displeasure of his colleagues by coming to Jesus by night and talking with him. Jesus encourages him that he who does what is true will come to the light, that it may be clearly seen that those deeds are being worked by God. God is drawing this man to himself. That is the picture Jesus gives us.

In Verses 22-30, John the Baptist appears for the last time in this gospel as a confirming witness to what John the Apostle has recorded about Jesus. The apostle makes two points here. First, he shows how John the Baptist said very plainly that Jesus is the supreme person in the universe; he is the focal point of all history. There were some who still thought that John the Baptist was a greater prophet than Jesus. Some of John's disciples saw Jesus as a rival. John the Apostle tells us about that.

After this Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized. [Later, in Chapter 4, we are told it was not Jesus himself who did the baptizing but his disciples did it in his name.] John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was much water there; and people came and were baptized. For John had not yet been put in prison.

Now a discussion arose between John's disciples and a Jew over purifying. And they came to John, and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, here he is, baptizing, and all are going to him." {John 3:22-26 RSV}

A sense of jealousy, envy, rivalry and competition is clearly evident there. John's disciples were upset that Jesus, whom John had introduced, was now setting up a rival camp just a mile or two down the river and winning more people than John was.

Competition is one of the most dangerous things to enter the family and people of God. A sense of rivalry between ministries is one of the devil's most effective tools to impede the progress of the gospel. Here it was a competitive baptism. The crowds that once came flocking to hear John are now going to hear Jesus and following after him. They were involved in the old numbers game, which is still prominent today. Who gets more? Who is the most popular? Whom do the crowds go to hear and follow?

Involved also was an argument about the meaning of baptism. Evidently some Jew questioned the meaning of Jesus' baptism, feeling that John's baptism was but an extension of the Jewish rite of purification (when your sins were forgiven you took a bath) which was mentioned in the Law. But now Jesus was baptizing. They could not understand that, so they came to ask John about it.

John clarifies the whole matter.

John answered, "No one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease." {John 3:27-30 RSV}

What a wonderful word this is from John! How clearly he answers in three important statements the implications of his own disciples that Jesus is his rival. First, he declares that all position comes only from God. That great statement is true whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian. It is true whether you are a Communist, an atheist, an infidel, a pagan, a Buddhist, a Mohammedan or whatever; it does not make any difference. All position in this world comes from God. Many men think they have won their way to power by their own efforts, by their intelligence, their hard work, even by their devious business practices which they sometimes love to take credit for.

If you feel that way I suggest reading the fourth chapter of Daniel. There the greatest king of the ancient world, King Nebuchadnezzar, struts in arrogant pride around the battlements of Babylon saying, "Is not this Babylon the Great which I have made?" Within weeks he is eating grass in the fields, having lost his mind, until he learns what he later proclaims: that there is a God in heaven who lifts men up and puts men down, and that he alone can exalt, as he can also dethrone. Many a man needs to learn this. John the Baptist knew that all position comes from God. John had been given a role in which he could take great joy and glorify God, but it was not the role of the Messiah. That belonged to Jesus.

Secondly, John knew his own role right from the start. "Don't you remember that I told you 'I am not the Messiah'?" he reminded his disciples. "If you think I am, you are departing from what I myself have taught you. I am not the Messiah. I have been sent before him. I am fulfilling the word of Isaiah and Malachi. I am the forerunner, the voice crying in the wilderness 'Prepare the way of the Lord,'" {cf, Isa 40:3}.

And thirdly, "I am filled with joy at what is happening." What a great word this is! John says, in effect, "When I see crowds of people leaving me and going to Jesus I delight in that because Jesus can do for them what I could never do. For their sakes I rejoice. Jesus is the bridegroom come to claim his bride. He is receiving those who believe in him; that is his bride. I am the friend of the bridegroom; I am the best man at the wedding. I have a certain role to fulfill, but I rejoice when the bridegroom claims his bride." I have never understood why we call that man the best man; why the bride, out of two choices, always chooses the one that is not the best man! Perhaps it is to make up for a secondary role in the wedding. But John is delighted with it. He says, "It fills my heart with joy to see them leaving me and going to Jesus."

Then he utters that great word which ought to be echoed by every Christian: "He must increase; I must decrease."

That is so different from how we ordinarily feel. It was said of the German Kaiser that he loved the attention of others so much he wanted to be the baby at every christening, the bridegroom at every wedding, and the corpse at every funeral!

But John says, "Jesus must increase. I am on the way out, and that is fine with me." Years ago as a young preacher I read a word from a great Scottish theologian, James Denny, who put it this way: "You can never at the same time convince people that you are a great preacher and that Jesus is a great Savior." It is one or the other. I hope that my own heart echoes this word of John the Baptist, "He must increase." I and all other preachers must decrease.

The second thing John says is that Jesus is not only the ultimate Person in the universe, but he speaks the ultimate truth.

First, Jesus speaks from the widest base. Verse 31:

He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth belongs to the earth, and of the earth he speaks; he who comes from heaven is above all. {John 3:31 RSV}

John is saying, "Jesus' word is far greater than mine because he is from the invisible realm of life -- heaven -- where he sees all the factors of life together in one tremendously comprehensive unit. He speaks truth as it relates to all other truth. I, however, am from the earth. I can see only a narrow, limited range of truth; and though what I speak is truth, it is nothing like the truth he speaks." There is a similar word in Isaiah, where the

prophet quotes God as saying, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts and my ways higher than your ways," {cf, Isa 55:8-9}. Why should we wonder that we do not always understand what God is doing? He is not to be contained in our little boxes. That is why the word of Jesus is the greatest word in the universe.

Furthermore, says John, Jesus speaks from personal experience. Verse 32:

He bears witness to what he has seen and heard, yet no one receives his testimony; he who receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he [the Father] gives the Spirit; {John 3:32-34 RSV}

Jesus has seen and heard all the mind and the wisdom of God. As we saw in the beginning of this gospel, Jesus is the Word of God himself, speaking all the mind of God, calling into existence everything that is.

Furthermore, that witness has a unique phenomenon connected with it. When Jesus says something that word is confirmed by an inner witness within men, which the Spirit gives. There is a confirming word of the Spirit. That is what he is saying here. I have often said that if we could have been there when Jesus spoke we would have noticed that the universal reaction of the crowds to what he said would have been, "Yes, that's right! That is exactly the way I feel!" Something within confirms the word. He did not need experts, authorities, or quotes from the leading minds of the day, to back up what he said. His words spoke to the heart; they were confirmed by the inner witness of the Spirit, the ultimate word.

Therefore, John says, Jesus speaks the final word of life, with final authority:

... the Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand. {John 3:35 RSV}

There is the Supreme Court of the universe -- the words of Jesus.

No wonder, then, John concludes:

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God continues to rest upon him. {John 3:36 RSV}

That wrath is the state of affairs that now exists in earth. In the words of the 90th Psalm, "We spend our days under his wrath," {cf, Psa 90:9}. We do what feels good to us, what we think is right, but we find ourselves continuing to be filled with emptiness, depression, hurt, anger, pain and death. The wrath of God is upon man because what we are is producing the agony and the hurt of life. We can choose to go on that way all our life if we want to; or, when we hear of the work, the words and the person of Jesus, we can choose life, life that consists of love, joy, and peace. That is the threefold inheritance of every believer. We can all have those any moment, in any circumstances. Love, joy, and peace. That is our inheritance in him.

The test of what you really want in life comes when you hear about Jesus. Do you come to the light or do you go on to live in darkness? That is the test.

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for the frankness, the utter honesty of your word. How it cuts across all the vain illusions of men, all our silken rationalizations, all our excuses for what we do and what we are. It helps us understand that except that we find the way in Jesus there is no other way out; we are locked into a pattern of defeat except for the breakthrough that our Lord has made. How our hearts rejoice that we can have a way out. Grant that we may take it, for there is no other way. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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