

“Three Verbs”

John 3:14-21

March 10, 2024

For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Dear Friends in Christ,

The words are simple and profound, one of the best-known verses in the Bible. It's called “the Gospel in a Nutshell”, the proclamation of your salvation, and so clear that one hesitates to expand and preach upon it. On the other hand, there is so much here that we could preach on this text for hours and not be done. We will split the difference: We'll take a few minutes and examine three words, three verbs. If you see what actions the Lord is doing, then you have cause for joy. Furthermore, if you know this text, you are well prepared to rejoice in your salvation and refute many a false doctrine. Let us, then, examine the Good News of John 3:16 a little bit more in depth. Consider the three Verbs of this verse.

I. The Verbs (Loved, Gave, Believes)

God so loved the world.... Loved. Just by itself, this statement is astonishing. You hear much of God's love, from Christian and non-Christian alike. However, they often attribute God's love to the wrong thing. Too often, that old sinful nature tempts us to believe that God loves us because we're just a little bit loveable. Sure, we have faults; but we're trying to live our lives as best we can. We like the movies where the hero has obvious flaws and scars, but still works hard to triumph in the end. That's how we are tempted to picture ourselves before God: Bloody but unbowed, still trying to do our best, and that's why God loves us.

This gives us entirely too much credit. Remember the truth that Scripture speaks: Apart from Christ, we are blind in sin, dead in sin, and enemies of God.

Picture, for a moment, a moment that every parent dislikes: A child has been playing with a toy of molded plastic, and a plastic part breaks off. "Mommy, Daddy, fix it please!" cries the child between sobs, holding the broken pieces. But a toy like that can't be fixed. No matter the love of the parent, once the toy is broken, it's broken; all that awaits now is the garbage can and landfill.

We are in far worse shape before God. Born in sin, we can't be repaired. We can't be reformed. We can't be patched up so that we're good enough to be in God's kingdom. Furthermore, we're not just a static, broken thing; we're constantly sinning against the Lord and offending His holiness. The only option for us is death. To parallel the example of earthly parents, all that is left for God to do is throw us away and move on; it only makes sense.

But "God so loved the world," says Jesus. He doesn't love the world because we are somehow loveable. That would be bad news for you, because His love for you would change depending on how loveable you were that day. No, God loves the world because of who He is: He is by nature loving. His is not a cheap, emotional feeling that comes and goes; no, this love of God is a desire to serve-and to

serve no matter what the cost. Remember, born in sin, the only option and outcome for us was death; so, the Lord in His love launched His plan to give us life. This is the substance of the next phrase.

...that He gave His only-begotten Son.... Gave – the second verb. Note two things about that word. First of all, He didn't "leverage" His Son or offer Him as part of a deal. He gave His Son as a free gift, no strings attached; this is how great God's love is, that He would save sinners at no cost to them. Second, when He gave His Son, He gave Him up to death on the cross. This is the world's salvation. As we have said: Because of our sin, the only option for us was death-our death had to be died because of our sin. So God, in His love, gave His only-begotten Son to die our death for us. Sinners sin, so Christ died. That's how much God loves the world: He's freely given His Son to die for the sins of the world. Once again, this shows how great is the Father's love for sinners: Even though most will not believe in Jesus-even though most sinners will give Jesus no thanks for His death for them, God has still given His Son to die for them, too!

So, God loves the world. He has given His Son for the world. This means that He has also given His Son for you. This is the Good News of the next phrase.

...that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Whoever believes. There's the third verb. Believes. Once again, this tells us of God's great love. When one gives a gift purely out of love, it is a gift: It is not a forced obligation. In other words, if you give a gift in love, you do so with the understanding that the recipient has the option of rejecting the gift-and that your love will not change because of that rejection. God has given His Son to die for the sins of the world, but salvation is a gift: He will not compel people to be His people. He will not force them to be saved or have eternal life. If people choose sin and death and judgment and hell, He will not require them to accept holiness and life and salvation and heaven.

This is why, although Christ has died for the world, not all the world is saved: Only those who believe have everlasting life.

This third verb, "believe," is one misunderstood by many. "Salvation isn't quite free," many will object. "I have to believe to be saved. That's my part, my doing, in God's plan." But this misunderstands faith and actually seeks to diminish God's love. Faith is not our part of the deal; it's not something that we come up with in order to be saved. Faith, itself, is also a gift that God gives to us. This is the proclamation of today's epistle: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Along with grace, faith is a gift. Whenever the Lord tells you to believe in Him, He is giving you the faith to believe. When He told the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and walk" (Mk. 2:11), He gave the man the ability to arise and walk. When He says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," He gives you faith to believe.

The Lord gives you faith -- it comes with the gift of forgiveness, and it's a package deal, along with life and salvation. In your Baptism, Christ joins you to His death on the cross for you, so that you don't have to die your own death for sin. He also joins you to His resurrection -- He gives you His eternal life. Although your body is still playing catch-up, and although your sinful nature still clings and tries to drag you back into the grave, you have eternal life-because Jesus gives you His. He has died your

death. He gives you His life. You are not destined to death anymore, because He has died His death for you. By water and the Word, He gives forgiveness, faith, life and salvation.

And so that you do not perish once again, He continues to sustain this faith with forgiveness throughout your life. In the proclamation of the Word, God gives His only-begotten Son, crucified and risen, to you; so that you might be forgiven of your sins and strengthened in faith. In the Holy Communion, God once again gives you His only-begotten Son: You eat His body and drink His blood for the forgiveness of sins-so that you should not perish, but have eternal life.

This is the Good News of your salvation: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Memorize this verse, and you can constantly remember your salvation. Furthermore, with this verse, you are well-equipped against many false teachings of the present day.

II. Good News vs. False Teaching

Plenty of people find fault with God's plan of salvation today. Keep this verse in mind, that you might explain to them the hope that is within you.

A common objection is this: "Clearly, God doesn't love the world because He has made the path so narrow. There's only one way to heaven? There is only one Savior? Why does God make it so hard to be saved if He really loves us?"

You know better, because you know John 3:16. Here's the proof of God's love: He gave His only-begotten Son for the salvation of the world. He gave His only Son. Apart from Jesus, there was no hope of salvation. But because Christ has died for the sins of the world, anyone who believes in Him will be saved. It is a foolish argument of the sinful nature to fault God for providing only one escape from hell. No one criticizes Jonas Salk because he only came up with one vaccine for polio; rather, they give thanks that a vaccine was finally found. No one criticizes parents of a soldier for losing only one child on the field of battle; they honor those parents whose son or daughter has made that sacrifice. Yet when God gives His only-begotten Son to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world, He is faulted for not doing enough.

The world will fault God for providing only one way to heaven, and try to invent other ways instead. This is terrible blindness. Instead, you give thanks that God has provided a way to heaven: His only--begotten Son -- the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn. 14:6). This Way to heaven is so great and all-encompassing that He offers salvation to all the world.

You will also hear this: "The reason Jesus came is to show us how to live. If we follow in His footsteps and imitate His example, then we will be saved." You know better, because you know John 3:16. God gave His Son unto death that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. That's what John 3:16 says. It doesn't say, "So that all who imitate His life might not perish." Does trying to follow Jesus' example save us? No. We can't perfectly follow Him, and His perfect example shows us how sinful we are. That sinfulness condemns us. But God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (Jn. 3:17). While Jesus set an

example of a perfect life, this is not why He came. He came to be given up to death on the cross, that you might be saved from your sin. His life and death-not your imitation-is your salvation.

It is here that the Old Adam pulls one of his favorite temptations out of the bag. "All right. I can't live perfectly, and I sin. Therefore, since Jesus has died to forgive me, I can do whatever I want." It's attractive, this notion that we have a license to sin and will be forgiven; but it's a false, damning teaching. The Lord has died to save you from sin; how could a Christian go on indulging in sin? It would be like saying, "I'm thankful that the Coast Guard pulled me out of the water and saved me from drowning. Now that I'm safe, I think I'll tie some bricks to my feet and jump back in." Sin kills, and Jesus has died to make you alive. When temptation beckons, you have this Good News: God so loved you that He has given His only Son to die for you-to save you from sin and death. It is this Good News that strengthens you against the temptations of the devil.

At this point, once again, another false teaching pops up, and a frightening one: "God gave His Son to set me free from sin and death. Therefore, if I sin at all, I am lost once again." What a horrible thought, to believe that any little sin robs you of salvation! But you know better, because you know John 3:16: God gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. Again, note that it doesn't say, "So that all who never sin again might not perish but have eternal life." The sins that you commit each day do not condemn you, because Jesus has died for all of these sins. In fact, there is only one sin left to condemn anyone: unbelief. Whoever believes will not perish, declares the Lord here; and in Mark 16:16 He says that "He who does not believe will be condemned." The most heinous crime or the grossest immorality does not condemn the one who repents of his sin, because Christ has died for him-because God so loved the world. It is only the impenitent one who is not forgiven. It is only the one who says, "I do not believe in Jesus," or "I will willfully continue in my sin and not repent" who stands in peril of judgment. Therefore, if you are haunted by your sins, take heart: Your sins do not condemn you, because Jesus has died for you. The devil would have you believe that you've sinned more than God's grace allows. He would have you believe that you should give up confessing your sins because you've gone too far, because he wants you to stop being forgiven for them; this, not your sins, will condemn you. No, don't listen to the devil, for he knows only loss and lies. Instead, let your sins be a constant reminder of your need for your Savior; run daily to confess your sins, and rejoice that Christ has redeemed you-so that you should not perish, but have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Dear hearers in Christ, rejoice to hear these simple words of salvation. God so loves the world-and you-that He has given His Son to die for you. Because He has given His Son to die for you, you will not perish, but have everlasting life. By the faith He has given you, you know this to be true. The Son has died to give you life. For His sake, you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.