

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## THE JUDGMENT OF GOD: A MOST INCONVENIENT TRUTH (PART III)

All of you have probably seen the bumper sticker with the smiling yellow face that says “Smile God Loves You.” What exactly does that mean? In the minds of the vast majority of people it simply implies that God wants us to be happy and that He (or she as some people imagine) is some cosmic Santa Claus who is always ready to affirm us and reassure us in our struggles to heal our inner child. The Bible emphatically affirms that God is love (I John 4:8), but as Vos pointed out, “It is a well-known fact that all heresy begins with a partial truth. So it is in the present case. No one will deny that in the Scriptural disclosure of truth, the divine love is set forth as a most fundamental principle, nor that the embodiment of this principle in our human will and action forms a prime ingredient of that subjective religion which the Word of God requires of us. But it is quite possible to overemphasize this one side of truth and duty as to bring into neglect other exceedingly important principles and demands of Christianity. The result will be that, while no positive error is taught; yet the equilibrium both in consciousness and life is disturbed and a condition created in which the power of resistance to the inroads of spiritual disease is greatly reduced. There can be little doubt that in this manner the one-sidedness and exclusiveness with which the love of God has been preached to the present generation is largely responsible for that universal weakening of the sense of sin, and the consequent decline of interest in the doctrine of atonement and justification, which even in orthodox and evangelical circles we all see and deplore.”<sup>1</sup> John 3:16 is surely the best known verse in the entire Bible, and one of the most abused as well. As Martin Luther, the torchbearer of the Reformation, lay on his deathbed, he repeated three times to those about him: SIC ENIM DEUS DILEXIT MUNDUM, UT FILIUM SUUM UNIGENITUM DARET: UT OMNIS, QUI CREDIT IN EUM, NON PEREAT, SED HABEAT VITAM AETERNAM—and then he died.<sup>2</sup> To those of you who can read Latin, you recognize at once that this is John 3:16. Robert Peterson highlighted this and observed, “Martin Luther called John 3:16 the gospel in a nutshell because it encapsulates God’s loving the world of sinners by giving his Son so that they will not perish, but have eternal life. The next verse is more emphatic: God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the lost, but to rescue them from hell (v. 17). Here we learn of God’s heart; he loves sinners and commissions his Son as a missionary to reach them. Jesus comes to them in love, offering salvation freely to all who will receive it. Believers in Christ need not wait for the Judgment Day to learn God’s verdict (v. 18). The Judge has come before that day as the Savior. In this capacity he announces the rulings of the Last Day ahead of time. All who trust Jesus as Savior, therefore, have already received God’s verdict of no condemnation. Unbelievers, however, receive the opposite verdict—that of condemnation (v. 18). They too need not wait for the Last Day; based upon their rejection of God’s Son they can know now that they are heading for hell. Oh that they would heed God’s warning, turn from their sins, and accept Jesus’ gift of salvation! The Son of God did not come into the world to condemn sinners any more than missionaries go into other cultures to condemn people. In both cases the motivation for going is love! Nevertheless, because greater knowledge brings with it greater responsibility, a by-product of the missionaries’ ministry is worse condemnation for those who reject their message. It is the same for the ministry of the Son of God. He came to save, not to condemn. Regardless, those who spurn him—since they

have rejected God's ultimate revelation—will reap worse condemnation than if they had never heard his name. Verse 19 summarizes the majority's response to Jesus: although he caused God's light to blaze upon a dark world, most people refused the light. Why? The reason is moral: They "loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." These are some of the saddest words in the Bible. Let us, however, not forget their purpose in context. God designed his words to drive us to his love as it is offered in his Son."<sup>3</sup> The great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon said that he preached on this verse at least once a year. Without a doubt, this is the best known verse in the Bible. What is the substance of this remarkable text? My former professor of theology, S. Lewis Johnson, has said, "From an analysis of the text it is clear that there are three important clauses in it. One expresses an act, another the result of the act, and the final one the purpose of the act, both negatively and positively. If we keep these things in mind, the structure of the text will remain clear before us, and we shall be much better able to follow its thought."<sup>4</sup>

## I. THE GREATEST FACT: GOD'S LOVE

John Flavel, one of the great Puritan writers made this observation: "The original spring or fountain of our best mercies, the love of God. The love of God is, either *benevolent, beneficent, or complacential*. His benevolent love, is nothing else but his desire and purpose of saving, and doing us good; so his purpose and grace to Jacob is called love, Rom. 1x 13. 'Jacob have I loved'; but his being before Jacob was, could consist in nothing else but the gracious purpose of God towards him. His *beneficent* love, is his actual doing good to the persons beloved, or his bestowing the effects of his love upon us, according to that purpose. His *complacential* love, is nothing else but that delight and satisfaction he finds in beholding the fruits and workings of that grace in us, which he first intended for us, and then actually collated or bestowed on us."<sup>5</sup>

### A. The Object of God's Love: The World

The word "world" (KOSMOS) does not refer to every individual in the world, past, present, and future, without exception and without distinction (cf. Romans 9:13). The love God has for the world is a *redemptive* love. The objects of God's love are actually redeemed, i.e., they are the elect. John Owen writes: "By the 'world,' we understand the elect of God only, though not considered in this place as such, but under such a notion as, being true of them, serves for the farther exaltation of God's love towards them, which is the end here designed; and this is, as they are poor, miserable, lost creatures in the world, of the world, scattered abroad in all places of the world, not ties to Jews or Greeks, but dispersed in any nation, kindred, and language under heaven."<sup>6</sup>

### B. The Measure of God's Love: The Gift of the Son

The greatness of God's love is emphasized in the adverb "so." In the Greek text it is in the emphatic position. It could be translated "in this way God loved . . ." The little word "that" (H $\square$ STE) is also significant. It is used with the verb "gave" (ED $\square$ KEN, aorist active indicative) to stress result. "The construction makes the result co-ordinate with the cause expressed in the main verb and relatively more important . . . The apostle then intended the meaning to be: 'whence comes this act of incarnation? It originates in the love of God.' More emphasis is on the incarnation itself than on the love which caused it. The question therefore is not, 'how does the love of God reveal itself?' but, 'what caused the incarnation?'"<sup>7</sup> It is the Son that God gives. And how is He given? Paul tells us in Romans 3:25. God gave His Son to be a propitiation—the NIV renders this "an atoning sacrifice"—but this does not fully capture the force of the Greek word HILASTERION – which underscores the fact that the death of Christ dealt with the broken Law and atoned for sin by satisfying God's justice and turning away His wrath.

### C. The Purpose of God's Love: Eternal Life

In Romans 8:32, Paul says, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things." Believers have, as a gift of God, everlasting life in Christ. The word "have" in the expression "have eternal life" is in the present tense and stresses eternal life as a present possession. This is the positive side. The negative is stated with equal force. The tense of the word "perish" (ΑΠΟΛΪΤΑΙ) looks at the experience as something to be avoided. "Whoever believes in him experiences new birth (3:5, 5), has eternal life (3:15, 16), is saved (3:17); the alternative is to perish (cf. also 10:28), to lose one's life (12:25), to be doomed to destruction (17:12, cognate with 'to perish'). There is no third option."<sup>8</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** "The key to the passage," said Warfield, "is in the significance of the term 'world.' It is not here a term of extension so much as a term of intensity. Its primary connotation is ethical, and the point of its employment is not to suggest that the world is so big that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when He gave His Son for it. . . . The passage was not intended to teach, and certainly does not teach, that God loves all men alike and visits each and every one alike with the same manifestations of His love: and as little was it intended to teach or does it teach that His love is confined to a few especially chosen individuals selected out of the world. What it is intended to do is to arouse in our hearts a wondering sense of the marvel and the mystery of the love of God for the sinful world—conceived, here, not quantitatively but qualitatively as, in its very distinguishing characteristic, sinful."<sup>9</sup> Two things should be pondered as we conclude our study of this text. In the first place, enormous emphasis is placed on the expression "whoever believes." Saving faith (which is the only kind on faith that is commended in Scripture) is the kind of faith that relies on and trusts in Christ to save. Secondly, the love of God is not some sentimental notion. It is a love that is demonstratable. It is seen in the cross. D. A. Carson, in his provocative little book *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, points out we live in a culture that increasingly rejects the God of biblical Christianity. He writes, "I do not think that what the Bible says about the love of God can long survive at the forefront of our thinking if it is abstracted from the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the providence of God, or the personhood of God—to mention only a few nonnegotiable elements of basic Christianity. The result, of course, is that the love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized. This process has been going on for some time. My generation was taught to sing, *What the world needs now is love, sweet love*, in which we robustly instruct the Almighty that we do not need another mountain (we have enough of them), but we could do with some more love. The hubris is staggering. It has not always been so. In generations when almost everyone believed in the justice of God, people sometimes found it difficult to believe in the love of God. The preaching of the love of God came as wonderful good news. Nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised."<sup>10</sup> In other words, people today consider themselves not only deserving the love of God, but also entitled to it! Well did John Owen once say, "Christ's offering Himself was the greatest expression of His inexpressible love. To fancy that there is any cleansing from sin but by the blood of Christ, is to overthrow the gospel. We are never nearer Christ than when we find ourselves lost in a holy amazement at His unspeakable love."<sup>11</sup> A word of caution, when speaking of the Love of God to unbelievers: We must never divorce it from the context of sin and God's judgment. Just this week I came across another example of how people badly distort the Bible on this subject. The June 16 issue of *Newsweek* contained an article by Lisa Miller ("Joining the 'Out' Club") on how Christian Colleges are increasingly being confronted by students coming out of the closet and announcing their homosexuality and wanting to have their group sanctioned on campus like any other student organization. "America's Christian colleges may be the last bastion of traditional values—places where parents can continue, in absentia, to protect their children from the

corrupting influences of the world and where the kids themselves often promise, as Swenson (the gay student at one of the Christian colleges around which the article is focused) did, to abstain not just from homosexual sex but from premarital sex, adultery and inappropriate fondling—and greed, idolatry and slander. But as homosexuality ceases to be a cultural taboo, evangelicals increasingly have had to grapple openly with the question of how to deal with the gays and lesbians in their midst. Now, even on very conservative Christian campuses, there are gays who are ‘out’ and who want their authority figures to recognize them—and their sexuality—as *deserving of God’s love*. Thanks largely to the efforts of Soul Force, which encourages dialogue between gays and Christians on campus, these students are trying to get organized. Gay and straight students at Samford University, in Birmingham, Ala., meet once a week at a church off campus; the group’s president is optimistic that the club will be approved within a year. At Gordon College, in Wenham, Mass., a gay-straight club recently failed to gain approval from the student government in a close vote, triggering a tsunami in the tiny community. At Seattle Pacific University, Beth van Dam spearheaded a failed effort this year to form a legitimate club for gay students. ‘The church needs to recognize that this is not a big deal,’ she says, ‘*Christ’s teachings are about love*’ (my emphasis). Carson warns about this very kind of mentality, “Christians will be seduced into thinking there is no hell, not because they choose to be selective about what teachings of Jesus they will accept, but because they have heard some extrapolations on the theme of God’s love that not only go beyond the biblical text but also deny some other part of Scripture. They will offer generous support of heretical teachers who appear on television, not because they love heresy, but because the scoundrels on the screen talk fluently of joy, peace, triumph, experience, and of some sort of Jesus – and who can be against such things?”<sup>12</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> G. Vos, Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: Shorter Writings ed. R. B. Gaffin, Jr. (P & R, 1980), p. 426. Gerald Bray, along similar lines writes, “In the Scriptures the love of God comes to us above all as the promise and assurance of salvation. Because of its personal character, it is a mistake to equate God’s love with material blessings, just as it is a mistake to tie his holiness to consecrated objects or places. Indeed, we are warned in both Testaments that God actually punishes and disciplines those whom he loves, in order to bring them to maturity (Pr. 3:12; Heb. 12:6). The Doctrine of God (IVP, 1993), p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Luther often pointed people who came to him for counsel of John 3:16 and said, “When the devil accuses us by saying: You are a sinner; therefore you are damned, we can reply: The very fact that you say I am a sinner makes me want to be just and saved. Nay, you will be damned, says the devil. Indeed not, I reply, for I take refuge in Christ, who gave Himself for my sins. Therefore you will accomplish nothing, Satan, by trying to frighten me by setting the greatness of my sins before me and thus seducing me to sadness, doubt, despair, hatred, contempt, and blasphemy of God. Indeed, by calling me a sinner you are supplying me with weapons against yourself so that I can slay and destroy you with your own sword; for Christ died for sinners. Furthermore, you yourself proclaim the glory of God to me; you remind me of God’s paternal love for me, a miserable and lost sinner; for He so loved the world that He gave His Son.” What Luther Says III, compiled by E.M. Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 1315.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Peterson, Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment (P & R, 1995) p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> S. L. Johnson, The Gospel of John: Believers Bible Bulletin (Dallas, 1989), Lesson 14, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> The Works of John Flavel I (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> The Works of John Owen X (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 321. I highly recommend this volume of Owen’s works.

To those of you who remain unconvinced of particular redemption, take time to go through this theological masterpiece.

<sup>7</sup> R. Hanna, A Grammatical Aid to the Greek New Testament (Baker, 1983), p. 153.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, The Gospel According to John (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> B. B. Warfield, The Saviour of the World (rpt. Mack, 1972), p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> D. A. Carson, The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God, (Crossway, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> The Works of John Owen I (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 301.

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson, From Triumph to Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13 (Baker, 1984) p. 103.