

TO ALL WHO BELIEVE

John 3:16-18

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 2, 2007

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

When we study the Bible, we should ask what it tells us about God and what it says about man. Our previous study of John 3:16 focused on its teaching about God, a summary of the gospel in terms of God's amazing love. But great as is John 3:16's message about God, its message about mankind is equally important. John 3:16 explains the Christian gospel in terms of mankind's greatest need, our greatest blessing, and our greatest possession, which is faith in Jesus Christ.

OUR GREATEST POSSESSION: "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM"

Along with the marvel of God's love, John 3:16 demonstrates the preciousness of faith. According to Jesus, our greatest possession is faith in him: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Since God has given his Son to be our Savior, it is through faith in him that we receive eternal life.

We therefore should define what it means to "believe" in Jesus Christ. What is saving faith? The Bible's teaching on faith consists of three key elements, each of which is known by a Latin name. First is *notitia*, or *knowledge*. That is, there are truths that must be known in order to have faith. There is content to the Christian faith; it is not merely a spiritual feeling or experience, but involves certain truths about God, Jesus Christ, and mankind that we must know and understand. This rules out any ideas of implicit or indirect faith. A

man was asked what he believed. He answered, “I believe what the church believes.” What does the church believe? “The church believes what I believe.” Well, what do you and the church believe? He replied, “We believe the same thing!” Such faith without personal knowledge is not biblical faith and does not save.

The second element goes by the Latin word *assensus*, which means *assent*. R. C. Sproul explains, “Intellectual assent involves the assurance or conviction that a certain proposition is true. When we say we believe George Washington was the first president of the United States, we mean that we affirm the truth of that proposition.”¹

At the heart of the Christian faith are beliefs about Jesus Christ. People call themselves Christians but say, “I just don’t believe in Jesus’ deity or that he died for our sins or that he was raised from the dead.” Then they are not Christians, because these beliefs are necessary to saving faith. John concludes his Gospel, “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31). This is the value of creedal statements like the Apostles’ Creed, which recounts many facts that Christians must know and affirm, at the heart of which is the record of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection for our salvation.

There is a third element of saving faith that goes beyond the merely cognitive element. The Latin word *fiducia* signifies *trust* or *commitment*. This means it is not enough merely to affirm that certain statements are true. We must also embrace them personally, trusting ourselves to them and committing ourselves to what they mean. Ultimately, this final element of faith takes us beyond truth claims to a person. We must commit to Jesus Christ himself, trusting in what he has done for us. Leon Morris explains: “Christian faith means the abandonment of trust in one’s own achievements and a coming to rely on what Christ has done to bring us salvation.”² James Boice adds, “We turn from trusting in ourselves and instead trust God fully. We see the infinite worth and love of the Son of God, who gave himself for our salvation, and commit ourselves to him.”³

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 78.

² Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 97.

³ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 414.

There is an unfortunate tendency when it comes to the wording of John 3:16. John writes, “whoever believes in him” will not perish. Some people think that “believing in” Jesus means nothing more than giving assent. They hang their hopes for heaven on this slender reed: “Sure, I believe in Jesus.” They mean that they believe that he exists, and at least some of what the Bible says about him. But it means practically nothing to them. They “believe in” Jesus, much in the way a child “believes in” Santa Claus. It is the particular legend or story that they were brought up with. But John means much more than this by “believing in” Jesus Christ. In his outstanding study of John’s Gospel, C. H. Dodd points out that this Greek construction translates a common Hebrew phrase in the Old Testament, which employs a form of the word “amen.” The verb “amen” signifies something that is firmly held or established. Therefore, when John says whoever “believes in him,” he is speaking of those who give their “Amen” to Jesus, embracing him as a trustworthy Savior and committing to him in return.⁴

Perhaps the best illustration of saving faith is marriage. A couple is married through a wedding ceremony, in which vows are made. On the basis of these promises, a man and woman open up their lives to one another, share all their property, and give of themselves wholly. On what basis? Because they trust each other for the vows they have made and therefore make this commitment. This is very much what happens when someone believes on Jesus Christ, trusting his promises to be true and committing himself or herself to be his disciple.

At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus described faith as “seeing”: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). Faith is having our eyes open so that we see Jesus for who he is. This reminds us that until we are born again we cannot and do not believe, because our sinful nature is opposed to faith. Therefore, to realize that you believe in Christ – that you accept what the Bible teaches, trust it as your own saving truth, and personally commit yourself to Jesus – is to have wonderful good news. It means that you have been born again, since Jesus says that

⁴ C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968), 179-186.

without the new birth you cannot even see, much less, enter God's kingdom. The new birth – regeneration – precedes and causes faith, so the way to know you are born again is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Joseph Ryan learned this from a woman he calls “the Ladybug.” This was the wife of a philosophy professor at the local university, who came to his church every week to scowl at him while he preached. She drove an old Volkswagen “bug” that she had painted red with black spots, just like her namesake insect. Week after week she attended his preaching. But one Sunday, he noticed her posture changing: she literally melted into a different person right before his eyes. When he approached her afterwards, she explained what had happened: “The light has come on. I understand. The Lord has worked in my heart.” In short, she was born again. A couple of days later she came into his office to talk about it, and there she revealed a better grasp of doctrine than Ryan did. He asked, “What happened to you the other day when you decided to follow Jesus.” She replied, “Young man, the only thing I had decided to do was how I was going to run you over in my Volkswagen. *Jesus* decided that I was going to be His follower.”⁵ That is right. The most exciting thing about the new birth is that our faith in Christ is his work and not our own, and therefore our salvation is securely established in his sovereign will.

John 3:16 shows that it is not enough to know what faith is, but it is necessary that we actually have it. There is a great divide in this world between those who perish and those who live forever. The sole distinction between the two is faith in Jesus Christ. The line between those lost and those saved is not who gave to charity or who observed certain religious rites or even who was a little better than others in terms of moral conduct. The one thing that distinguishes those who perish forever and those who live forever is trusting faith in Jesus. God gave him to be our Savior and salvation comes to all who believe – and only those who believe. There is one way of salvation – believing in Jesus Christ – and faith is therefore necessary for you to be saved.

⁵ Joseph “Skip” Ryan, *That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003), 103.

OUR GREATEST NEED: “SHOULD NOT PERISH”

A few years ago, theologian R.C. Sproul wrote a book the title of which asked a vitally important question. It was called “*Saved from What?*” Sproul began by recounting a time almost forty years ago when a stranger abruptly stopped him and asked “Are you saved?” Sproul was taken back by the intrusion and responded with the first words that came into his mind: “Saved from what?” At this, the man stammered and stuttered, unsure how to respond. As Sproul points out in his book, unless we know what we need to be saved *from*, we do not have an adequate understanding of the gospel and cannot truly share the Bible’s message with others. He remembers, “Though this man had a zeal for salvation, he had little understanding of what salvation is. He was using Christian jargon... But sadly, he had little understanding of what he was so zealously trying to communicate.”⁶

The same could not be said of John 3:16, which clearly presents the great peril from which we must be saved. God gave his Son, John says, so that “whoever believes in him should not perish.”

According to John, our greatest need is to be saved from perishing. But what does “perish” mean? The best way to answer is to refer to statements in this same chapter that illuminate this teaching. We think, for instance, of Jesus’ reference to the “serpent in the wilderness,” which Moses lifted up (Jn. 3:14). Jesus was referring to a deadly episode in Israel’s history. During the exodus, the people had complained against God, so the Lord sent fiery serpents among them, and many people were bit and died. This illustrates John 3:16’s warning that without faith we will perish – that is, we will die.

Those snakes point back to the entry of sin into the world, when the Serpent tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. God had warned them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). To perish, therefore, is to suffer death, just as Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden and barred from the Tree of Life. Through their sin as our first parents, and through our own sins, the poison of

⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Saved from What?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002), 13-14.

death has entered our souls. Unless we are saved, we will experience everlasting death. To “perish” does not mean to cease to exist, but to be “tormented day and night for ever” (Rev. 10:10, 15). Paul says that those who perish in their sins “will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thes. 1:9).

This raises the question, “How can a God who loves the world permit anyone to perish this way?” John answers, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Jn. 3:18). The key word is “condemned.” The God who loves the world is also a perfectly holy judge. Abraham asked, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:25). The answer is Yes! God’s holy nature requires justice. This means that we must be judged for our sins unless they can be removed, the judgment being eternal death (see Rom. 6:23).

Consider a woman who loves her cat and showers it with affection. But when the cat arrives at the front door with a mouse in its teeth, that same woman stands there with a broom barring the way. Why would she forbid entry to the cat that she loves? Because she absolutely loathes rodents and will not let them into their house. So it is with the holy God who loathes all sin. Unless our sin is removed, then our entry into heaven is barred and our sin must be punished.

This is where God’s love enters, because God showed his love for the world by sending his Son to die for our sins. God has made a way for us to be forgiven and escape judgment, at infinite cost to himself. This way requires that we receive God’s Son in faith, so that our sins may be transferred to his account at the cross, where Jesus died as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn. 1:29). But if we spurn God’s loving offer of salvation and refuse to believe on Jesus Christ, neither we nor God can avoid our condemnation. An unbeliever’s suffering in hell will not be because God lacked love, but “because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

People resent the thought of God condemning anyone, especially themselves. But we have no cause to resent God. John reveals God’s purpose in giving his Son to die for our sins: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the

world might be saved through him” (Jn. 3:17). God is never mean-spirited, even in his awful wrath. God has extended love to a world that was wicked, rebellious, and already condemned. God did not send Jesus to cause sinners to perish: sinners were already going to perish without Jesus having to die. God lovingly sent his Son to pay with his own blood the sin-debt for all who believe. God’s offer of the gospel is like a doctor who prescribes an antidote to deadly poison. If we will not admit the deadly venom within us and refuse to take the antidote, we condemn ourselves to death. So it is with a refusal to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. John’s Gospel describes Jesus as a light shining in the world. Leon Morris reminds us:

It is not the purpose of the shining of the sun to cast shadows. But... shadows are inevitable. The shadows are, so to speak, the other side of the sunshine. So it is with condemnation and the coming of the Son of God. He did not come in order that people be condemned. But there are great moral issues involved, and those who refuse salvation thus condemn themselves. The condemnation is as real as the salvation.⁷

“Saved from what?” The Bible assures us that our greatest need is to be saved from the wrath of God, saved from the just condemnation our sins deserve, and saved from perishing in everlasting death. One of the tragedies of the *Titanic*, the great ocean liner whose sinking took so many lives, was the number of empty seats on the lifeboats taking people to safety. A greater tragedy is the unclaimed offer of God to save us from eternal death through faith in his only Son. To say this is not to deny God’s sovereignty in salvation or man’s totally depraved condition. It merely highlights the tragedy that God sincerely offers salvation to the world through faith in his Son, but so great is the bondage of sinful unbelief that men perish rather than believe.

OUR GREATEST BLESSING: “BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE”

In his love for the world, God gave his Son not only to meet our greatest need, but also to offer us the greatest possible blessing.

Jesus completes his gospel summary: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not

⁷ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 102.

perish *but have eternal life*” (Jn. 3:16). God saves us *from* perishing in our sins, and God saves us *to* eternal life in his glory.

As with “perishing,” we should define “eternal life” in keeping with the teaching of Jesus in this chapter and in John’s Gospel generally. “Eternal life” obviously speaks of a quantity of life: believers in Jesus will live everlastingly into the future. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn. 11:25-26). Those who believe in Jesus will participate in his resurrection life. They may die as a result of accidents, sickness, or old age. But Jesus has removed the sting of death from believers – he has taken away its condemnation and he has overcome its effects – just as the Israelites had the poison of their snake bites removed by looking to the serpent Moses lifted up (Jn. 3:14). To one who believes in Christ, death is a gateway into a new life that will never end.

But “eternal life” is not only about the *quantity* of life believers enjoy. It also speaks to the *quality* of life that begins as soon as we believe. At the end of chapter 3, John the Baptist says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (Jn. 3:36). Notice the present tense of that statement. Believers possess eternal life as soon as we believe in him. This connects with Jesus’ earlier teaching. He speaks of us being “born again” and “seeing the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). He says we can be “born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8). These describe eternal life. One of the most famous Puritan books was titled, “The Life of God in the Soul of Man,” and that is an excellent description for eternal life.⁸ A poet said of another Puritan, Richard Sibbes, “Of this blest man, let this just praise be given, Heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.”⁹ That is how it should be for us all.

Eternal life is a life of spiritual understanding and vitality, a life in which God’s own Spirit lives and grows in us, and a life of seeing and even entering God’s kingdom of grace and light. Paul said that the kingdom of God consists in “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Those are qualities of eternal life.

⁸ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1986).

⁹ Izaak Walton, cited in *Works of Richard Sibbes*, 7 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), I:xx.

Does this not highlight the preciousness, the necessity, and the urgency of faith in Christ? In his great love, God saves us *from* perishing, *to* eternal life, *through* faith in his only Son. What money can never buy, what works can never earn, what tears can never inspire, God gives to those who believe in his Son. This being true, we ought to repent of any unbelief and turn to Christ in faith. We should guard and nurture our faith through God's Word and prayer. If we struggle to believe, we should come to God humbly, as Jesus' disciples did, asking, "Lord, increase our faith!" (Lk. 17:5). The God who loved us enough to send his only Son will not fail to send the Holy Spirit to strengthen the faith by which alone we can be saved.

"LIFE! LIFE! ETERNAL LIFE!"

John Bunyan brilliantly depicted salvation through faith in his great book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. His hero, Christian, discovered that his great need was to avoid perishing in his sins. A man named Evangelist advised him to "Fly from the wrath to come." So Christian began running, crying out, "Life! Life! Eternal life!" People thought he was a lunatic, just as they think of Christians today. Some friends tried to stop him. They ran after, reminding him of all that he was forsaking. But Christian invited them to join him, explaining, "All which you shall forsake is not worthy to be compared with a little of that that I am seeking to enjoy... I seek an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away; and it is laid up in heaven, and safe there, to be bestowed... on them that diligently seek it." Though they refused and went back, Christian pressed on in faith.¹⁰

Bunyan's tale is so valuable because he understood the message of John 3:16 so well. Christian fled destruction towards eternal life. And he ran not just anywhere, but to a narrow gate beyond which a light was shining. Beyond the gate, Christian came to a cross. Looking at that cross – like Israel gazing to Moses' serpent lifted up – the burden on his back – the weight of his many sins – came sliding off and fell away forever. There, he gained the right to enter into the Celestial City. At the end of his journey, as Christian drew near to

¹⁰ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 11-13.

that city, the angels came and told him, “You are going now to the paradise of God, wherein you shall see the tree of life, and eat of the never-fading fruits thereof... You shall have white robes given you, and your walk and talk shall be every day with the King, even all the days of eternity.”¹¹ Bunyan describes Christian and his companions going into the heavenly city through the gates: “And lo, as they entered, they were transfigured, and they had raiment put on that shone like gold... All the bells in the city rang again for joy, and it was said unto them, ‘Enter ye into the joy of your Lord.’”¹²

That may be allegory, but it is nonetheless true. And it will be true to all who believe, because “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).

¹¹ Ibid., 197.

¹² Ibid., 200-201.