

JOHN THREE SIXTEEN

Intro: Tonight I want to begin devoting our evening services to The Great Verses of Scripture. Some time in the future I want to talk about The Problem Verses of Scripture, verses which seem to contradict what the rest of the Bible teaches. But for now I want us to look at the verses which we love and which have been outstanding for the influence they have had upon the people of God and upon the world.

I can think of no better verse to begin with than John 3:16. It was the first verse I ever memorized. When I was very young an older lady in our congregation who was like a grandmother to me told me that she wanted to give me a NT, but I would have to do one thing for it: memorize John 3:16. And I did!

This may be one of those verses which you have heard so often that you never actually had to try to memorize it; you learned it by hearing it over and over again. Tonight I want us to look at it again, hoping that as we do we may see some truths in it which may have escaped us before.

Before we look at the verse itself, let us look at the circumstances which are given to us in John 3.

First of all, we see immediately that John is recording for us a conversation between the Lord Jesus Christ and one of the most outstanding Pharisees of His day: Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This meant he was a member of the Sanhedrin.

The last words which John records of Nicodemus are in v. 9--and there we have a question. The Lord Jesus begins to answer, and the answer goes down through v. 21.

Therefore, we can say about John 3:16 that they are the words of the Lord Jesus which He said in answer to a question asked by Nicodemus. "A more startling declaration to the ears of a rigid Pharisee it is impossible to conceive" (Pyle, I, 158).

Why was it startling?

Because it contained truth which he did not know, and which ran contrary to what he had been teaching and what he himself believed. And yet he must have been tremendously impressed with the ministry of Jesus Christ, possibly feeling some needs in his own heart, for him to have come to the Lord as he did.

Let us notice the things which must have amazed him. As we do, notice that the Lord says practically the same thing three times --positively in vv. 14, 15, then in v. 16, and third in a negative way in v. 17.

Now for the startling things:

I. WHAT OUR LORD SAID ABOUT GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE WORLD:  
"For God so loved the world."

Perhaps the strangeness of this teaching was the reason the Lord said it three times, beginning with an OT experience which showed His love for Israel. Nicodemus would never have taught that God had the same kind of love for every person even within the nation of Israel itself--to say nothing of the whole world.

But this is not all about this first part of the verse. He would also have been startled by the word which our Lord used for love. It meant that this was a love which the Lord had deliberately chosen to display after having carefully considered the objects of His love, and then deciding that there was that in man which was worth His love.

Perhaps this is a side of the Gospel which needs more emphasis. God sees sin when He looks into the heart of man, but He also sees that which was made in the image and likeness of God, and He loves us for what we are--and in this respect His love is always to be a source of great encouragement to the world, and to believers. Cf. Rom. 5:7, 8; Eph. 2:4, 5; Rom. 8:32.

Remember that this is "God" we are talking about, and that His love includes the whole world. And He "so" intensely "loved" that this leads us to our second point.

II. WHAT GOD DID IN ORDER TO EXPRESS HIS LOVE: "that He gave His only begotten Son."

In v. 14 the Lord Jesus had called Himself, "the Son of man." Here, "His only begotten Son." The first speaks of humanity; the second, of Deity in humanity.

Thus, the first evidence of God's love was to be seen in the fact that His Son, His only Son, became a man. But even greater evidence was to be seen in the reason He became a man. To describe it our Lord uses the verb, "gave."

Notice its parallel in v. 14: "lifted up." Our Lord was going back to the OT (which Nicodemus knew) to pick up a picture of the Cross. "The serpent" represented a curse--that which our Lord had to become if the world was to be delivered from judgment. Cf. Gal. 3:13, 14.

The Lord Jesus presents to Nicodemus the greatest mysteries ever to be made known to man--the greatest lesson in theology that this Pharisee had ever had.

But this is not all. He startled Nicodemus in another way.

III. WHAT THE CONDITION IS FOR OBTAINING ETERNAL LIFE: "That whosoever believeth in him."

This is not what Nicodemus had been taught, and it was not what he was teaching. He would not have opened the door of salvation, nor would he have put it on the basis of faith, and he was surely not limiting it to faith in Jesus of Nazareth--even though he did believe that Jesus was "a teacher come from God."

To Nicodemus, salvation meant work--and a lot of it. It meant turning to Judaism. It meant obedience to the Law and to the traditions of the elders. It not only excluded the Gentiles; it even excluded the Samaritans.

Here the Lord opens the door wide to anyone, but He indicates that there is only one door--if the world would come to God it must come through Christ--not by work, but by trusting Him who was given in death for the sins of the world.

How simple for man--the only way every person could be included! But what a terrific price our Lord had to pay!

One other thing:

IV. WHAT GOD COMMITS HIMSELF TO AS FAR AS THE LENGTH OF SALVATION IS CONCERNED: "should not perish, but have everlasting life."

"Have" here means, have, and continue to have. In other words, our Lord is promising Nicodemus a life which is eternal in character, but also a life which will never be taken away from him--"eternal life."

Nicodemus would never teach anything like that! How amazing the Gospel really is! The reason such a promise could be given was because it was dependent upon the Savior, not the one who was believing.

Concl: What were the results? Is it not amazing that we do not find our Lord pressing Nicodemus to believe? But He does not. Instead, we start watching as we read the Gospel of John to see if we ever hear of Nicodemus again. AND WE DO!

Cf. John 7:50; 19:38-42. Note the word, "they."