

Every Human Soul Is a Battleground

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn though to our Bibles this morning. We're going to be reading in John's Gospel. Edward Lobb began a little series in John's Gospel last week, beginning in John chapter 3. And we're still in John chapter 3, but we're going to read the middle section this morning, just a short section from verse 16 to verse 21, containing some very well-known words.

It's always tempting, isn't it, when the words are so well-known, just to sort of let it skate over us and we think we know it. But let's pay attention because often there's a lot more there than perhaps we realize.

And Edward is going to be digging that out for us shortly. But let's read this section together. John chapter 3 then at verse 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

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. 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.

And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world. And people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil.

[1 : 45] For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come into the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.

Amen. And may God indeed bless to us this his word. Well, good morning, everybody.

Let's turn, please, to John's Gospel, chapter 3, and to this short but packed passage, verses 16 to 21. My title is Every Human Soul is a Battleground.

Now, what I mean by that is that everybody who becomes a Christian realizes that a surrender has to be made. Very few people become Christians without a fight.

For some people, that fight is short. You realize quickly and early that the only right and proper and possible thing that you can do is to acknowledge that Jesus is king, not only the king, but your king, and that he must be, because he's the Son of God who has loved you and has laid down his life for you.

[3 : 17] So you can do nothing but surrender to him. You fall at his feet with gratitude, and you ask him to forgive you. And in your case, that fight is rather short. There you are.

You're a Christian. You're adopted into the Lord's family. And from that moment onward, your life is radically redirected. But for other people, that battle is much longer.

It may go on for months. It may go on for years. It was rather like this for me. I was in my late teens, and my head was filled with all sorts of nonsense. I had wild plans that I might do this thing, or I might be that sort of person, and have all sorts of colorful adventures of a self-centered kind.

And then, at that stage, I began to hear the gospel, and I realized the implications, and I did not want to surrender. As a young man, I had the wind in my sails, and I didn't want some strong heavenly hand to take hold of the ship of my life and redirect it at that point.

I wanted to be the captain of the ship. I wanted to be the captain of my own soul. But as I look back after all these years, how glad I am that the Lord prevailed over me.

[4 : 30] He battled with my soul, and he defeated me. Now, many of you, I'm sure, will have been in just that kind of position, fighting for a long time with the Lord, and then finally running up the white flag and saying to him, Lord, you're right.

You are God. I surrender. Accept me as a servant. Accept me as your child. Now, you may think it odd that this famous paragraph in John's gospel should be thought to be about the battle for the human soul.

But I hope I can persuade you that that is the issue here. John the Evangelist, the author of this gospel, has written this book with the clear purpose of wanting to persuade his readers to believe in Jesus.

John wants his readers to know that by believing in Jesus, they're able to enter eternal life, to have eternal life. But it's an exercise in persuasion, this whole book.

John knows that many of his readers will initially find his message about Jesus hard to swallow. They'll find it unpalatable. So he's reasoning with his readers throughout this gospel.

[5 : 41] He's arguing with them because he wants them to see that to turn away from Jesus is the most disastrous thing that any human being can do. But to turn to him in trusting faith is the road to joy, to forgiveness, to peace, and to eternal life.

John is having to persuade his readers because he knows that many of his readers, both back then in the first century and today in the modern age, many of his readers will fight hard to resist his message.

Now we'll return to this question of battle and struggle a little bit later. But first I want us to notice an interesting feature of the way that John the Evangelist writes up his account of the life and work of Jesus.

This short book that we call John's Gospel consists largely of narrative sections. Sections that describe what Jesus did and what Jesus said.

In other words, John is telling us the story of Jesus. But it's not all narrative. There are several sections, some shorter, some longer, where John, as it were, steps back from the narrative and explains the significance of the piece of narrative that he's just written.

[6 : 58] A good example of this comes in the first 11 verses of chapter 2. Maybe if you've got your Bible there, you turn back a page to chapter 2. Now you'll see that verses 1 to 10 are a narrative section describing the famous wedding at Cana of Galilee where Jesus turned the water into wine.

Those first 10 verses tell the story. They tell us what Jesus said, what his mother said, what the master of the feast said, and what Jesus did.

But in verse 11, John steps back from the narrative and he explains the significance of this miracle, this sign. He tells the reader in verse 11 that Jesus did this miracle to manifest his glory with the result that his disciples believed in him.

Now do you see the difference between verses 1 to 10 and verse 11? We have the narrative and then we have the explanation or the interpretation. of the narrative.

Now it's just the same here in chapter 3. The first 15 verses that we were looking at last week are narrative where John is telling the story of Jesus meeting Nicodemus.

[8 : 14] John carefully records the questions that Nicodemus asked and the answers that Jesus gave him in order to teach him that a man must be born again if he is to enter the kingdom of God.

But in verses 16 to 21, John leaves the narrative, he stands back from it and explains the significance of it and particularly the significance of verses 14 and 15.

Let me read those two verses again. Verse 14, Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Now there in verse 15, John, in the words of Jesus, is sounding the theme tune of his whole book, which is that to believe in Jesus is the way to eternal life.

But that verse 15 is the first moment in John's gospel where John uses this phrase eternal life. Now he's going to use it many times as the book develops, but this is the very first time.

[9 : 23] And this is why he says what he does say in verses 16 to 21. You see, his great theme is stated here in verse 15. The cat, you might say, is out of the bag.

Belief in Jesus is the way to eternal life. So John is now saying, I'm going to explain this. This is the most important truth, the truth which the human race needs above every other truth.

So listen carefully, my reader, and I will tell you why it is so very significant. Now the sharp-eyed reader will notice that in the English Standard Version, the one that I'm using here, you'll see that verse 16 opens with inverted commas, but verse 15 has no inverted commas to end it.

In other words, the editors of the ESV, this version, are implying that verses 16 to 21 are a continuation of what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus. Now the original text, John's text in the Greek, has no punctuation marks at all.

So the modern publishers and editors have to guess what the punctuation should be. And I think it's more in keeping with John's style of writing to attribute verses 16 to 21 to John rather than to Jesus. [10:41] You see, Jesus has just made this stunning, overwhelming statement in verse 15, that whoever believes in the Son of Man will have eternal life. And John, knowing how momentous that statement is, is now saying to the reader, hold on my friend.

Verse 15 is so important that I need to unpack it for you now rather slowly and rather carefully. Look at the first word of verse 16.

It's the word for. And in much of the Bible, when this word for begins a verse or a section, the writer is usually flagging up that he's now going to unpack and explain something of great importance that he's just written.

And I think we'll understand verses 16 to 21 much better if we read them as an unpacking of verse 15 than if we simply regard them as a bolt from the blue. After all, verse 16, for very good reasons, is often described as the most important or most famous verse in the whole Bible.

And it's often quoted as if nothing came before it and nothing came after it. But it has a very solid context and we'll grasp it better if we see it as the beginning of John's unfolding of the meaning of verse 15.

[12:00] Well, let's turn now to these verses 16 to 21. I'd like to take them in two sections under two headings. First, in verses 16 to 18, John is showing us why belief in Jesus is necessary.

Now, if you're not a Christian, you might be thinking, I don't see why belief in Jesus should be thought to be necessary. Well, if that's your position, John is wanting to persuade you that it is necessary and he's wanting, therefore, to engage in a battle for your soul.

Let's begin, then, at verse 16. God so loved the world. Now, that word so may mean so much. As a parent might pick up a little child and look at the little child and say, oh, I love you so, so much. That could be so in that sense. But more likely, it means thus or in this way. In other words, God loved the world thus.

In this way, God loved the world. Yes, he showed care for it by making it, by structuring its continents and oceans, by creating its wonderful birds and animals, but he loved it and demonstrated his love for it by giving up his only son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[13:27] What, then, does it mean for God to have given his only son? What kind of a gift is this? Is it like a man giving a dress to his wife or giving a football to his young son?

No, it's not. Verses 14 and 15 have already told us what kind of a gift God gave to the world. Look back to verse 14. Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness so that the Israelites who had been fatally bitten by poisonous snakes should be able to look at this bronze snake in faith and be healed.

In other words, that was a gift, this bronze snake, given to save life, to save people from dying. The Israelites were dying. They were desperate. They didn't need some trivial gift like a football.

They needed a potent remedy to save them from death. Now, verse 16 is making just this point. God gave his son as a sacrifice to be strung up on a wooden pole.

So that, so that what? So that Jesus should be an example of how to die nobly or how to die when there's a miscarriage of justice? No.

[14:44] Look at verse 16. So that whoever believes in him should not perish, eternally perish, away from God, but rather have eternal life.

That's how God has declared his love for the world. God did not give Jesus to the world simply to show us how to be brave in the face of unjust suffering. God gave him to rescue the perishing. Jesus is a savior, not simply an example. That's why belief in Jesus is necessary. Unless we put our trust in him, we will perish.

church. Friends, we live today in a world that wants to draw a veil over heaven and hell, not to notice it, not to think of it as reality.

And this modern mindset has affected many people deeply. This surely is why the world has reacted with such fear and such anxiety to the pandemic. People have lost their view of eternity.

[15:44] They've lost their view of the world to come. It's fashionable to deny that anything exists which cannot be measured by scientific instruments. John Lennon many years ago sang, Imagine there's no heaven.

It's easy if you try. Now he wasn't opening up some new line of thought when he wrote that song. He was jumping on a bandwagon which had been rolling for many years already. The atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote, When I die I shall rot. And in those words he was making a denial. He was seeking to deny that anything would happen to him after his death. He was trying to shore up his belief that there is neither heaven nor hell nor a day of judgment. Now who is more likely to be telling us the truth? John Lennon, Bertrand Russell or Jesus and John the Evangelist?

Jesus was constantly pointing out the great truth that the day of judgment is pressing in upon the world. That he himself will return as the judge and will judge the world justly.

[16:54] That he will return not as the humble ragged preacher of his first visit to the earth but as the glorious king who will separate the whole population of the world into two groups the saved and the lost the rescued and the rejected.

People who don't like the Bible's teaching about heaven and hell will sometimes say and it's rather odd but they will sometimes say I do like the teaching of Jesus because he teaches us to love each other and to be forgiving and kind to turn the other cheek to help strangers.

Well yes he does teach these things and they're important and they're wonderful but they are not the center of his teaching. The center of his teaching is not about life in this world at all.

It's about the world to come. The question his teaching raises for each one of us is the question am I ready to enter eternity? After all any of us might enter eternity this week.

John the evangelist in these six verses is giving us a condensed sermon whose purpose is to prepare everyone who reads it for eternity. Look with me again at verse 16.

[18:09] What was God's purpose in giving his son Jesus to the world? It was to give people an escape route from perishing and a means of entering eternal life.

It is a declaration of love. I love you world God is saying you have gone terribly wrong you've rebelled against me you deserve only to perish but I'm sending my son to throw you a lifeline he will carry the punishment you deserve for you in your place the death penalty he will take it for you believe in him whoever you are look on to verse 17 because it tells us more it tells us about God's motivation in sending Jesus to the world verse 17 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 now do you see how this verse rewrites the false view of God that some people have of him that he's nothing but fierceness and vengefulness and he hates people and can't wait to send people to hell no that's not true he looked at the world with infinite compassion he saw men and women hating him and hating each other their minds full of warfare and bitterness their personalities twisted and corrupted filled with selfish desire their very humanity and capacity to love people being squeezed out of them Jesus himself God in human form he showed exactly this kind of profound compassion remember those verses from Matthew's gospel he saw the crowds great crowds milling around him in Israel harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd that's the way he viewed them or listen to his words as he looked over the beloved city of Jerusalem Jerusalem he said the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not you wouldn't have me I've come as your rescuer but you won't recognize me verse 17 God did not send his son into the world to bring condemnation rather to bring salvation but verse 18 presses home the reality of the plight the desperate plight that the world is in verse 18 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 you see

God did not send Jesus to bring condemnation to the world Jesus didn't need to bring condemnation to the world because the unbelieving world is already under condemnation that's what the verse is saying what the world needed was not condemnation which it already had but salvation when Jesus came he threw out lifelines to the drowning population of the world to men and women who were on the brink of eternity as all of us are today the question is will we grasp the lifeline that he throws out to us the Titanic sank in the North Atlantic in 1912 I guess we all know the story pretty well but that night there was a a cruising ship called the Carpathia which was in that part of the ocean at the time and an urgent message was sent to the captain of the Carpathia to hurry and pick up survivors because the Titanic was sinking now just imagine yourself as one of those survivors many people did survive imagine yourself sitting in a lifeboat wrapped in a blanket shivering through the night waiting for the morning to come the Carpathia the rescue ship

approaches one of its officers looks down at you and shouts down come up on board and you reply no thank you

I'm British I'm pretty tough I can swim it's only a few miles to New York City I don't need you thank you very much you wouldn't have said that would you and yet that's what many people say to Jesus I don't need your rescue I'm tough I'm self-sufficient I can survive they don't know what they're saying when they say that they've closed their minds to the reality of the day of judgment they've been offered Jesus the lifeline of salvation but they've spurned him and in the words of verse 16 they've chosen perishing rather than eternal life they've swallowed the lie of Bertrand Russell and they've said when I die I shall rot they've comforted themselves with a false comfort thinking that heaven and hell are unreal friend if you're in that position let me ask you to think again can it really be that true wisdom lies with an atheistic philosopher rather than with Jesus Christ just notice how comprehensive is God's appeal in these verses look at verse 16

[23 : 33] God gave his son that whoever believes in him should not perish whoever verse 18 whoever believes in him is not condemned whoever it means that there is hope and opportunity for anybody everybody now you might be thinking but surely this can't be for me I'm too wicked I've done so many awful things isn't Jesus just interested in nice people certainly not thank God he is the friend of sinners he came for sinners or maybe you're not thinking I'm too wicked but you might be thinking but I'm such a poor weak wretched downtrodden human being my self-esteem has been simply crushed by the events of my life surely I'm beyond help I'm beyond rescue friend you are not who made you who loves you you may feel that no human being on earth loves you but the Lord

Jesus loves you he wouldn't have come for you otherwise look at verse 16 God so loved the world you are part of the world that he loves you're not beyond redemption the Lord Jesus waits for you invites you to come to him and put your trust in him and when you do you will find that there is a loving church family the Lord's people who are ready and waiting to welcome you and to support you and to nurse you back to life verse 16 teaches us why belief in Jesus is necessary it shows us so clearly that there are only two possible destinations for every human being perishing or eternal life there's no third there's never a mention of a third we need to dwell on that word perishing it's the saddest word in the world it's easy just to let your eyes skim over it without your brain really engaging with it perishing that a human being made by God wonderfully lovingly crafted by God should in the end slip away from him into the endless horror of hell that breaks

God's heart it made Jesus weep and we rightly say that God is omnipotent that he's all powerful that he can do whatever he wants but there's one thing that the Bible teaches us that God will not do and cannot do and that is to call back from hell a person who has chosen to go there by refusing to come to Jesus Christ so belief in Jesus is necessary because the alternative is to perish well now secondly let's look at verses 19 to 21 where John shows us the reason why some people refuse to put their trust in Jesus and the reason John tells us in verse 19 is that light has come into the world and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil that's a very vivid way of putting it and we'll think about this in just a moment but first let's take notice of the opening words of verse 19

John has just made these great statements in verses 16 to 18 about salvation and condemnation and it's as though he now draws breath after verse 18 and pauses for a moment before he launches into a great summing up in verse 19 and this he says is the judgment the Greek word translated judgment is the word crisis this is the crisis this is the critical turning point of the whole matter I'm now going to tell you John is saying why so many people refuse to come to Christ this is the point at issue this is the real reason he's saying why unbelief is so prevalent in the world light has come into the world the light has come into the world Jesus who is the light of the world has come but so many people have turned away from him because verse 19 they have loved the darkness and verse 20 they have hated the light and they won't come to the light lest their deeds be exposed now this is not difficult to understand is it we know from the knowledge of our own behavior behavior that whenever we have an impulse to do some wrong thing some wicked thing our minds devise some way of doing it secretly we don't parade our wrongdoing in public because we don't want to be caught and we don't want to be shamed in front of other people we know that the proposed course of action is wrong and sinful and shameful but we think

I'll do this in such a way that nobody will ever know about it here's an example when I was 10 years old I stole my first cigarette from a cigarette box in the sitting room at home I then found a box of matches and what did I then do did I go to my father's armchair and sit in it and light up no I did not I

went into the garden I knew of a very large rhododendron bush at the far end of it was about 3 in the afternoon and I had carefully checked that my parents and even my sister were not at home that's juvenile we've all done things like that we conceal our moral crimes but it's the same in adult life it's just that it's more serious if a man is wanting to do some false accounting he will go to great lengths to appear to be presenting honest accounts he tries to keep his deceptions undercover he doesn't want to be caught and exposed and shamed or a man who is wanting to commit adultery will contrive all sorts of elaborate deceptions in order not to be found out he wants to preserve his marriage and his family life but he also wants to sleep with another woman so he lives a life of secrecy and deception now what does all this have to do with

[30 : 11] Jesus it has everything to do with him he is the light that has come into the world his shining personal integrity his wonderful teaching about human beings exposes the dark reality of what we naturally love look at that honest phrase there in verse 19 people loved the darkness rather than the light why because their deeds were evil the darkness is shown up to be our natural habitat by nature we're like moles if a mole ever surfaces and comes up into the sunshine its first thought is to get underground as quickly as possible it hates the light the light exposes it and shows up all its vulnerability John is showing us here that Jesus arrival in the world is like the moment when a great search light is suddenly switched on and its brilliant beams sweep out across the world some people are horrified by this sudden blaze of light switch it off they shout we don't want our deeds to be shown up we love our deceptions we love our greed and stealing and adultery and pride and self centeredness do you see how the problem is moral not intellectual people loved the darkness that's a commitment of the heart not the mind it's to do with what the heart desires not about what the mind is convinced of and look at the sadness here in the use of the verb loved verse 16

God loved the world but verse 19 people loved the darkness but thankfully not everybody has loved the darkness look at verse 21 but whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be seen clearly that his deeds have been carried out in God some people come to the light it's not because of their own moral virtue or their own will that their lives are filled with light and turned around not at all John says at the very end there their deeds have been carried out in God in other words by his grace by his strength nobody can save himself but God in his love for the world is merciful to those who put their trust in Jesus those who run to him because they don't want to perish what John is doing in verses 19 to 21 is describing the two categories of people that he has identified in verse 16 those who are perishing and those who are launched into eternal life those who are perishing he says love the darkness and hate the light and grit their teeth against Jesus and say I'm never going to put my trust in him because I love the darkness and I don't want the sordid reality of my life to be exposed but those who are headed for eternal life come to the light they recognize the wonderful character and the beauty of Jesus they recognize why he came they recognize the love of God that lies behind the sending of Jesus and so they come to him and when they do they are filled with relief and joy so let me say this to anybody listening today who is not a Christian you don't need to keep hugging the darkness you don't need to keep on turning away from God and hiding from him why not because God loves you and is willing to forgive you and accept you now of course it's hard it's humbling to come to him and confess the realities of the darkness of one's own heart you might think but

I can't afford to do that but friend can you afford not to to remain in the dark is in the end to perish to end up in what Jesus calls the outer darkness the ultimate darkness this is why John's words are about the battle for every human soul he's saying to the reader surrender to Jesus trust him verse 16 the one who believes in him is the one who will enter eternal life so what then does believing in Jesus really mean what does it involve well let me try and explain it very simply it involves leaning the full weight of your confidence on him coming to him in repentance and confession lord i'm a sinner i lean the full weight of my confidence upon you let me give a little visual demonstration i'm not sure if people on camera will see this but there's a chair just behind me and i'm about to sit on it you can just see the top of my head anyway i'm sitting on this chair i'm now resting my confidence leaning my weight upon this chair i've got my feet on the ground however but when i do this on camera you can see i'm now taking my feet off the ground so therefore every ounce every last gram of my weight is being lent on this chair i'm trusting this chair to hold me entirely i'm leaning the weight of my confidence upon it that's what it means to trust Jesus you lean the weight of your confidence upon him for this life for what remains of this life and indeed for eternity here's a

suggestion when you get home later today why not go to your bedroom and stretch out your full length on your bed and say to jesus lord jesus just as this bed is supporting every ounce of my body's weight i'm trusting you i'm placing my full confidence in you to support me through the rest of my life and for eternity i want to leave the darkness and come into your light so that you might forgive me and teach me and enable me to love you and to serve you will you do that if you've never done it before take courage and trust him it's not easy but it's necessary just think of the alternative and remember that although god knows your heart everything about it he loves you don't underestimate that love it was because he loved the world and every person in it that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life well let's bow our heads we'll have a moment of quietness to think about this again lord lord lord god in heaven we thank you so much that you have loved the world loved it deeply and you've expressed that love for the world under condemnation in sending your son that he should give up his life and rescue everyone who turns to you from death from perishing from eternal death be gracious we pray to each one of us and help us to respond to this wonderful love by trusting you and trusting our lord jesus and in his name we pray amen