

God's Amazing Love

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[0 : 00] Well, this morning I had six words to expand in that context, and they were a very great and precious promise.

My grace is sufficient for you. This evening I've got five words which I can only describe as a uniquely unique statement, and you'll find that in John 3.16.

I won't tell you the page number because I have a different Bible. I think it's on your sheet, but I would like you to open your Bibles because we're going to look at this sentence today, tonight, and we're going to look at it in its context.

John 3.16, and I've got five words from that verse to read. God so loved the world.

Those are the five words we're going to look at. We shan't get further than that in the context of John 3. God so loved the world. In the month of August, I go back to my old church, which is St. Helens in the city of London, and the rector goes on holiday in August and gives me the great privilege of standing in his place.

[1 : 25] And he allows me to preach on those Sunday mornings in August. There are many people away, though it's still a joy for me to meet old friends.

And of course there are quite a few visitors who drop into the city if they can find their way into the city of London, which is quite difficult. And so I had to decide this August what I was going to take. And I decided to return to this very familiar verse, John 3.16, perhaps the most famous verse in the New Testament. And what I discovered, or rediscovered, because it's always fresh when you come back to the Word of God, was very surprising.

And at the same time, I think very shocking. So that's what I want to look at with you this evening. So first then, the surprise.

When I came back to John 3.16, you would have thought that there were no surprises left in such a familiar verse. And the surprise is this, that there's nothing like this sentence in the whole of John's great gospel.

[2 : 37] 21 chapters, but there's nothing like it. It's quite unique. God so loved the world. The apostle of love, John, constantly talks about God loving his son.

And you'll see that even in this chapter, in verse 35, when you look there, the father loves the son and has placed everything in his hands.

And he also talks about God loving those who love and believe and submit to the son. But there is nothing like this sentence here in verse 16, God loving the world.

That is the world of rebels, the world that crucified his son. The only comparable kind of statement in John's gospel, if you flip back a page, is chapter 1, verse 29, when John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Now, understandably, the sentence, God loved the world, has caused some scholars to feel very uncomfortable. And so they try to reinterpret it.

[3 : 53] And they say that this sentence really means, God so loved the world of his elect. God, in other words, loves the people who love his son, the true living church.

But a man called Don Carson, and I guess many of you have heard of Don Carson, has written a commentary on the gospel of John, and he demolishes this completely. And when Don Carson demolishes something, it is a good, powerful demolition job.

So here is this amazing statement. And once we grasp the state of the world, the state of mankind, the state of fallen human creatures, I think we'll see how very surprising, and in a sense, how very shocking this statement is.

I think when I started out in August, I thought that I would start by talking about the good news of the love of God. But actually, straight away, I had to face up to the shocking statement of the state

of the world here in John chapter 3.

And I'm going to describe it under three headings, which are here under your nose in this chapter, and you can follow them with me. I wanted to talk about the divine love.

[5 : 10] I did, in fact, talk about the divine love, but ever against this dark shadow of the world and its sinfulness. So here's my number one statement. According to John 3, even the best of men, and by men, of course, I mean the best of men and women, are unfit for the kingdom of God.

And that comes out, obviously, in the story of Nicodemus that is familiar to all of us and that was read just now. It almost seems, doesn't it, in verse 3, as though Jesus wanted to shock people. Nicodemus comes by night, presumably because his reputation wouldn't stand coming to talk to Jesus in the daytime. And he says, no one could perform these miraculous signs unless they've come from God.

A sort of polite introduction. And it almost seems as though Jesus wants to shock him straight away in verse 3. I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he's born again.

No preliminaries, no gracious words, as he spoke in chapter 4 to the Samaritan woman. Straight in, it seems as though he wants to shock this great Nicodemus.

[6 : 28] And if you look at verse 3, the negative seems to make it even more emphatic, doesn't it? I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they're born again.

And that's underlined in the repetition, verse 5. I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he's born of water and the Spirit. And then verse 6, hammers it home.

Just look at verse 6. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Spirit gives birth to spirit. In other words, however cultivated, however religious, however distinguished flesh might be, however decent, however likable the person you meet in the street or in the office or at home, unless they're born again, they can't enter the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus, I take to be a decent man, an upright man, a distinguished man. Indeed, verse 10, we're told, he was Israel's teacher, the great teacher of the people of God, the ancient people of God of Israel.

Last night, you may have seen on the telly a remarkable program on Gandhi and the independence of India. I just happened to get to my room, turned it on and saw it.

[7 : 54] And I suppose Gandhi was the hero of that program, the father of the nation. Although independence was not exactly done as he wanted, yet the whole thrust of the program was to lift him up as a very, very great man.

And in a sense, what Jesus would say to Gandhi is what he said to Nicodemus, except man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Shocking? Yes, I think it is.

Even the best of men and women are unfit for the kingdom of heaven. Even the best, most distinguished people in our life, in our society, in our country, unfit for the kingdom of heaven.

Unless they're born again. Second shocking statement in this chapter, even the best of men and women prefer not to listen to the truth.

And I think it's this particularly that struck me in August as I was preparing my sermons for those Sunday mornings. Look very carefully at verses 11 and 12.

[9 : 03] I tell you the truth, Nicodemus. We speak of what we know. We testify to what we have seen.

But still you people do not accept our testimony. In other words, he says, I've come from heaven as a first-hand witness, but you don't listen. Verse 12.

I've spoken to you of other things and you don't believe. How will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? Then this is repeated. It's very interesting how these things come again and again.

Look at verses 31 to 34. 31. The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks as one from the earth.

The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it is certified that God is truthful.

[10 : 08] For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. Isn't that a remarkable thing? The very words of Jesus, spoken each day, recorded in the Gospels, the very words of God.

And he says, you don't want to listen. And again, the no one is very striking, isn't it? Look at verse 32 again. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one, no one listens.

It's really summed up, I think, in verse 19. I was delighted to find 19 because I always want to have a text ready for Christmas and carol services and that kind of thing when one is asked to speak. My Christmas text for 2009, I can tell you in advance, is verse 19. It's a marvellous Christmas text and there's no sentimentality in it at all.

This is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. We're always being told, aren't we, nowadays that the festival of Christmas was originally a pagan festival at the return of light.

[11:18] In other words, on the shortest day of the year, people who are pagans, long before Christianity came to this country, would meet together to rejoice over the fact that the light was returning. So imagine us to be a group of pagans and we're celebrating the fact that the shortest day is over and that the light is returning.

And a chap stands up and says, well, you know, friends, I actually prefer the darkness. That and a day when no electricity, nothing like that at all, when darkness is a real burden.

So here is what this verse says. Light has come into the world and Jesus Christ, that is the truth has come, and men loved error and evil instead of light because their deeds were evil.

People don't want to hear. Not just the stupid, but the clever and cultivated people don't want to listen. Now, is that your experience?

Certainly my experience. I had a letter from John Chapman, the Australian evangelist. Many of us have come to love John. And he was telling us about an evangelistic effort that was being made in his local church at home.

[12:28] And he said, everyone in our church is suffering from evangelistic fatigue. That is to say, they've asked their friends again and again and again to come to services, to listen to what is going to be said, and their friends won't.

And they feel they've got nothing more that they can do. They've asked everybody and it's been a failure. So he said in his letter to me, we've got to rethink our whole strategy to meet our friends because they won't come and listen.

Compare that with verse 27. I love this. I think I'll start at verse 29. The bride belongs to the bridegroom.

This is John the Baptist. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine and it is now complete.

In other words, when you're a real believer like John the Baptist, you wait to hear, you listen to Christ when he comes and you're full of joy when you hear his voice.

[13:37] So here are the first two statements we get from John 3 about the world. First, every man and woman is unfit for heaven without exception. Secondly, every man and woman is unwilling to hear or to listen even.

I was passing Borders Window and I went for a walk this afternoon and I see that Dan Brown's latest book is advertised.

It's pure hokum, of course. Complete nonsense. It's made him a trillionaire, they say. And his first book, *God, Delusion*, has been printed in 30 languages. So already, all over the world, people are willing to listen to Dan Brown but not to the Word of God through Jesus Christ.

As one reviewer put it, not in a Christian paper. The only people who can believe this sort of stuff, referring to Dan Brown, the only people who can believe this sort of stuff are those who think Princess Diana was killed on the orders of the Duke of Edinburgh or that the late Queen Mother was a lizard.

Apparently, there are people who believe that. Well, you never know. Thirdly, even the best of men and women, unbelieving, are under the anger of God now.

[15:02] Look at verse 18. I was struck when I read that, I listened to this again just now. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, praise God, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, that is, here and now, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

And again, verse 36, that sums up the whole chapter. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son, notice by the way the logic of that, the opposite of believing is rejecting.

It's not apathy. Whoever believes has eternal life, whoever does not believe, that is, rejects the Son, will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

Well, there's nothing difficult to grasp in that language, is it? John is very profound, but he's very straightforward and clear. You can't mistake his reporting. It's not a happy diagnosis.

It's an accurate description of the natural man and woman. The simplest words can make it. And what we're told is that God loved this particular world.

[16:13] A world that's unfit for him, a world that doesn't want to listen to him, and a world that's rejected him. God loved that world, this world.

And he so loved it that he gave his own Son that whoever believes might not perish. I wish there were time to go on to the lovely little phrase in verse 17, but I don't want to go on further than my sentence at the moment.

I love that little sentence in verse 17, only four words. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world.

It's a very familiar language today, that, isn't it? saving the world. In January, our Prime Minister announced that he was going to save the world from a financial meltdown. Actually, I don't think he did too badly with other people's help.

We get the meetings of national leaders every year now trying to save the world from the consequences of climate change. Saving the world has become quite a cliché. The police and the secret services are trying to save us from the terrorism especially from Islamic terrorism and our army is in Afghanistan for that reason.

[17:36] The medical community is working overnight to save the world from pandemics and all these... I've forgotten what this flu is called but I hope you haven't caught it yet.

But here, apart, here is something quite amazing. To save mankind from its folly, to save it from eternal death.

In other words, Christianity is a rescue religion. It needs to be because of what I've described as the state of the world. And a rescue religion is never welcomed amongst the culture despisers of this life, the chattering classes, and sophisticated church people.

Now, this morning I wanted to hasten onto application and I want to hasten onto applications now of this wonderful statement that God loved the world as it really is.

Not as it's idealistic but as it really is. God loved this particular sinful world. So let me start with some applications. Number one, here in John 3.16 and in the context we discover the nature of true faith.

[18:57] That is the nature of Christian faith, saving faith, real belief. In the train coming up yesterday I passed a building, I think it was just outside Newcastle, with a large printed notice on the building have faith in God.

Have faith in God. Now that's not a specifically Christian sentence. To have faith in God, well the Muslim has faith in God.

Many religious people have faith in God. You notice in John 3.16 it's not belief in the love of God that saves you. There are many people who believe in a loving God and hope that that means that the wrath of God does not exist.

Now it's very clear, isn't it, from our verse, that saving faith is belief in the crucified Son of Man. I want to say it again.

Saving faith is not belief in the love of God. It's belief in the crucified Son of Man. Look at verse 14. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.

[20:21] That is, the crucified Son of Man. Verse 16. For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

verse 18. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned. Whoever does not believe stands condemned because he has not believed in the name of God's only Son.

It is not enough to say, I believe that God is a God of love. Saving faith is belief in the crucified Son of Man. I'm bound to ask you, have you put your trust in Him?

Second application. In this chapter we learn or relearn what a secular society thinks of real Christianity. And we better know this, haven't we, because we're moving into a more and more secular society.

I don't want to appear alarmist. I have heard preachers talking as they were entering into total paganism. I think there's a great deal still of solid Christian conviction amongst many people in this country and I see many live churches arising.

[21 : 37] So I'm not an alarmist but it's still a fact that we're becoming more and more secular. notice therefore the strong language again of verse 19 and 20.

What is the attitude of a secular society towards the Christian revelation, towards the fact that Christ has come? Verse 19, men, secular man, loves darkness.

darkness. Verse 20, secular man hates the light. That means that secular man loves error and evil and hates Christ's claim to be the way, the truth, the life.

So that's what's going to be our future. It's not that secular man is indifferent, doesn't mind what is happening. Loves darkness, hates light.

It's quite frightening, is it not? And we see evidence of that, I think, increasingly. Third application.

[22 : 55] This love of God for the world tells me how I may recognize a true Christian person, how I may recognize God's true people, how I may know a true Christian church when I come to it, how I may know what living Christian belief really is about.

The answer is that if God so loved the world, then his people must love the world too, in the sense that however inadequately, they're missionary-minded and missionary-hearted.

it. I sometimes think that home is a tougher mission field than going to Africa. Seems when I meet missionaries from Africa that they get a great welcome.

People want to listen to what they have to say. I don't find my next-door neighbors like that. We can only tell a real Christian church by the fact that it is looking out.

Now I know that just maintaining a healthy church costs a great deal. It costs a great deal to maintain a living church in money, in prayer, in effort, in man hours, in women hours.

[24 : 12] How much more does it cost in money, prayer, effort, and man and women hours to reach out? I think it's easy to feel a failure. I feel a failure myself.

It's so hard, isn't it? I guess it's probably best not to think about the world, but just to think of individuals. We'll only see people coming to Jesus one by one.

I love those words of Anne Cousins's metrical version of the words of Samuel Rutherford. Oh, if one soul from Anworth meets me at God's right hand, my heaven will be two heavens in Emmanuel's land.

If only one soul from Glasgow, that's your aim, isn't it? Don't let's think of the world, let's think of Glasgow and our next-door neighbour and one person whom we might pray for. Fourth and final application.

God's immeasurable love makes sense of life. life. Look at the verse again. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

[25 : 32] Notice how the verse talks about the future. The theologians have a posh way of putting this. They say we've got to have a doctrine of ends. Where does it all lead?

You can't make sense of life if you don't know where you're going. What this verse tells us, well of course it does tell us that there is wrath at the end for those who reject but that's not our theme tonight.

I'm talking about the love of God to his people. Through Christ what we're told by this verse and the love of God is that he opens his eternal home to whoever, even the worst of men.

the ultimate purpose of God in this universe is the glory of his son. He's put everything in his hands. But it's God's loving purpose to bring many sons and daughters to glory to share with the son in his home.

You won't be surprised that the apostle Paul can put this better than I can. Let me just read a few words of the apostle Paul talking about a doctrine of ends and how the love of God is opening out to the Christian an eternal future of God's loving kindness.

[26 : 54] Just listen to these words from Ephesians 2. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work and those who are disobedient.

All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. And like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses, it is by grace you have been saved and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

Now listen to this. I think it's wonderful. In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

I love that, his kindness. kindness. That's what he's going to show us in the future forever. You know, I think sometimes to talk about the love of God, it's just too vast, it's too bright, it's like staring at the sun, you can't do it.

[28 : 18] So let's talk about God's love in terms of the revelation of his kindness to us in this life and in the age to come.

Christianity is a constant rediscovery of the kindness of God to us. In the coming ages he's going to show us the incomparable riches of his grace in kindness.

Isn't that a lovely word? Just kindness. And then he brings us wonderfully down to earth and faces us with Monday morning. For it's by grace you've been saved through faith, this not from yourselves, it's the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. I love that. So he opens to us the future, tells us where we're going, and then brings us down to earth and says, God has made you in this world to do his work for him.

Seems to me that if the devil does his work properly, what he will aim to do is to destroy any concept of the future.

[29 : 31] We're too busy to think about that. So he destroys the idea of hell and of heaven. Also, he'll be hard at work destroying the whole idea of God's creation, that God made us for a purpose.

And of course he's having a field day in this year with the celebration of Darwin, because it's the devil's aim to show, quite wrongly of course, that that means that the Darwin means that God can't have created us.

Now God's creation of us and his future plan for us is the framework in which we live, if we're intelligent Christians. I can only make sense of life if I know that God made me with a purpose to do what I am to do, the plan that God prepared in advance for me to do.

That makes sense of my life, and to tell me that this revelation of his kindness in giving me a life worth living is not for this life only, but goes on into the eternal future.

That's the measure of the love of God. So that we can sum it up by saying we love him because he first loved us.

[30 : 55] God so loved the world. Let's pray. The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me.

Heavenly Father, we can only paddle in the ocean of these glorious truths. We thank you for the way in which the teaching of Jesus is so unsentimental, how it faces us with the state of the world as it is in your sight.

We, by nature, were unfit for your kingdom. We ourselves did not want to listen. We ourselves, until rescued, were under your anger and wrath.

Thank you for your love and mercy and grace toward us. We pray tonight, Heavenly Father, that some here may put their trust in the crucified Son of Man, may submit to Jesus, your Son, who died for them, that they may find in him a reason for living, that they may do those good works that you have prepared for them to do, and that they may look forward to that glorious future in which you reveal to us endless kindness.

So, Heavenly Father, thank you for your kindness to us in every day. Thank you for your kindness today and the promise of your kindness tomorrow. And we thank you for these wonderful things in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Saviour.

[32 : 49] Amen. Amen. Do stay behind after the service for coffee and for fellowship together.

But we're going to end our formal part of the evening now by singing once again, number 620. Glory to God, the source of all our mission, Jesus be praised, the Saviour, Lord and Son.

Praise to the Spirit who confirms the vision in all the world, the will of God be done. A hymn that points us to Christ and points us to look outward in sharing him in the world.

Number 620. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.