

Jesus: God's gift of life

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, very warm welcome again to the lunchtime service here at the Tron. It's great to have you with us, especially if you haven't been before or if you're new.
- Real pleasure to have you with us. Let's pray before we begin. Amen. Lord God, we are about to read words that deal with the very greatest realities in the whole universe.
- That's a heavy thing for me to speak of them. But we pray that each of us would be able to give our full attention to these things. Many of us are busy.
- Many of us are burdened by health or worry for others or a busy morning or afternoon ahead.
- And we pray for help to focus and see what you have to say to us through these words. Please speak to us now, we pray.
- [1 : 0 7] In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, if you could turn with me to John chapter 3. That's on page 888 of the Church Bibles, if you have one of those.
- John chapter 3. We're carrying on in our series on John's Gospel, which looks at the evidence about Jesus, which leads to faith in us, which then leads to life that God gives us.
- And as you'll see, those themes come out really strongly in the passage we're about to read. John chapter 3, verse 16. And again, that's page 888.
- 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.
- [2 : 3 1] And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. 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. After this, Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing.
- John also was baptizing at Enon near Salem, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized, for John had not yet been put in prison.
- Now a discussion arose between some of John's disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, he who is with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, look, he is baptizing and all are going to him.
- John answered, A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.

[3 : 47] The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

He must increase, but I must decrease. He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way.

He who comes from heaven is above all. He bears witness to what he has seen and heard. Yet no one receives his testimony. Whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true.

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. Verse 16.

[4 : 57] The first word we read is, of course, the most quoted, most loved, most memorized verse in the whole Bible. It's full of encouragement to every Christian, and it's God's promise of salvation to everyone who is not a Christian, who will come to him.

It's something that should be read carefully and thoughtfully because thousands of people have had their lives transformed by these simple little words.

They've been called the Bible in miniature for a good reason. Now, before we plunge into them, let's think about where we are in this story.

Last week, we looked at the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus, a religious leader. He was a man who could see that Jesus was a teacher sent by God. But when they talked about how you could be part of God's kingdom, Nicodemus ended up leaving deeply surprised and perplexed and confused.

He thought a good religious man like himself would be part of God's kingdom, that he would have eternal life. But Jesus made claims that really startled him.

[6 : 08] And here in these verses, we have those claims laid out again in full, in detail, and they really are startling. And they lay out a very clear choice for us.

To believe in Jesus, to accept his testimony, is to have life. But to deny him, and what he says, is to be under judgment.

We'll look at the passage in three separate sections. Firstly, 16 to 21, Jesus is the gift of salvation. 22 to 30, Jesus is the goal of salvation.

And 31 to 36, he is the witness to salvation. So firstly, 16 to 21, Jesus is the gift of salvation, or perhaps the gift of life.

These verses are, I think, John's explanation, summary explanation of what Jesus has been telling Nicodemus.

[7 : 11] They might be Jesus' own words, we're not sure. But we know again that Nicodemus thought Jesus was a teacher come from God, just as many people think today. But this section tells us something quite different.

And it starts with that wonderful verse. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

That's far more than to be a teacher, isn't it? Let's take it phrase by phrase. Firstly, God the Father loved. He looks on those who he has created with pity, with compassion.

And everything that Jesus does in being sent is rooted in that love. And who did he love? He says he loved the world. And if we had time to look through John's gospel, we'd see that when it talks about the world, it's not just talking about everything created.

That would be a wonderful enough truth. Rather, it talks about the world as humanity in opposition to God. The world of war and greed and lies and selfishness.

[8 : 16] All the things, in other words, that God hates. And this, of course, is exactly what needs saving. It's exactly what needs Jesus to bring life to it. In other words, God loves sinners.

And in the words of the great old writer J.C. Ryle in this passage, we must not hesitate to tell any sinner that God loves him.

So if you feel today you are not good enough for God to love, then you are quite right. But at the same time, he loves you anyway. And he didn't wait for you to clean up his act to send his son.

He certainly didn't wait for you to clean up your act to start loving you. And so we can tell one another from these words with confidence that whoever we are, God does love us truly, deeply, and powerfully.

Powerful enough to send his own son. And that's what he did. He gave his only son. That's how, that's the way God loved the world.

[9 : 22] He gave the son that he loved from before the foundation of that world. And that, of course, is how you measure love, isn't it? If you ever try and do that. I'm not sure it's a very interesting thing to do in most cases.

We don't usually have a scale for measuring it. But we know we love someone if we're really willing to drop everything for them. You know, what time of night are you willing to get out of bed for someone if they call you and say they need to see you?

What would you give up for them? And God does not give up the worlds he made for us, or the stars, or the galaxies, or the angels in all their hosts.

He gives the one and only irreplaceable thing he has for us. The son he loves. And he gave him so that whoever believes might not perish.

He gave him to snatch us from the grasp of death itself. He gave him so we could have eternal life. In Jesus, God gives us the gift of life.

[10 : 24] He gives us him so that those who are under judgment for their sin, those who have rebelled against God, can have life by believing. Nothing more.

Whoever believes. Whatever you have on your conscience. Whatever you regret. Whatever. You know, when you wake up in the night and you're just playing that situation over and over again in your mind and thinking, I should have done that so differently.

Whatever it is. He came to give you life despite it. And then verse 17 drives that home again. Shows how it contradicts Nicodemus' expectations about some teacher who would explain a way for us to get to God.

God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world in order that the world might be saved through him. You know, some people think that believing in Jesus is some kind of test.

That basically we'd be okay, but God decided that he would set an exam. You know, if you believe in Jesus, in that case I'll award you life.

[11 : 28] And if you don't, well, I'll take some pleasure in punishing you. That is surprisingly common and yet an utterly awful idea.

God says, no. Judgment is coming, and we'll see that in a moment. But the Father loves. And Jesus did not come to condemn. He came because we were in trouble.

And he came to give life. That is how God loved the world. He loved it in a way that meant he would give the gift of life to rescue those who were dying, those who were in need.

And rejecting this love, therefore, is a sign of condemnation. Because if Jesus came in this way, then to reject it is to reject life itself.

Whoever believes in him, 18 says, 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.

[12 : 37] And 19 and 20 are, to my mind, perhaps some of the saddest verses in the whole Bible. The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. People do evil things.

And we do, don't we? And they don't want to be seen for what they are. So they love the secrecy of darkness. They reject the life that is in Jesus Christ. Jesus the light came into the world.

But people loved the darkness instead. Like a child who's done something naughty, and thinks that if they curl up in the corner, and hide their head, and make sure their eyes are well covered, you won't see them, and you won't notice what they've done.

When we do wicked things, we love darkness. We keep the truth even from ourselves. Because then in the darkness, there's no need to come face to face with what we are. And you know, this light is truth.

[13 : 41] It's bright. You open your eyes, they will sting for a minute. When you feel what you are. But opening your eyes to that light is the only way to life.

Judgment here is deserved because it's embraced. Often, perhaps unknowingly, but unknowingly because the truth itself here has been refused.

Not to come to this light, to this life, is like a shipwrecked sailor floating in a cold, dark sea. Seeing the searchlight sweeping across the waters from the rescue boat.

And ducking their head beneath the waves. Because they cannot face telling the people on that boat how stupid they got themselves into that mess. Stick up your hand.

Come to the light. Grasp that hand that's there to rescue you. Because Jesus Christ came to save. He came to love.

[14 : 44] He came to give life. And he is himself the gift of life. Secondly, in 22 to 30, we see that Jesus is the goal of life.

It feels like a sudden change of pace and topic here. And you'll see the little discussion has ended. And we see Jesus goes off to the Judean countryside.

And his disciples start baptizing people. People are coming to be baptized. And so on. It's a real change of pace. What we're going to see here is that John the Baptist will give testimony, evidence about Jesus.

And what he will be saying is that Jesus himself is the goal of life. You see there's a rather strange little verse in there.

It's an argument about purification. There was an argument started, it says, in 25 between some of John the Baptist's disciples and a Jew about purification. And John's disciples go to John and they point out, and there's a note of envy here in their voices, that all these people are going to Jesus instead of coming to us to be baptized.

[15 : 56] And they expect, obviously, John to be a little upset about this. And John, on the contrary, you can see, is delighted. He's not surprised at all.

And here he's dealing with the same misunderstanding of Jesus' role that Nicodemus had. They think, they're having an argument about purification. How can you be made clean and acceptable to God?

Is it, you know, the Jewish customs of washing before meals? Is it being baptized by John? How do these things work out? And we know from last week, from verse 5, if you were here, that neither of these things are anything but symbols of the deeper reality that Jesus promises.

If you are to be made completely clean, you need to be born by the water and the Spirit, we saw. Made clean from the inside. And John the Baptist has spent his ministry saying, the Messiah is coming, the one who will do this, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

But his disciples just don't get that. They're thinking about how they come to God and completely blind to the greatness of Jesus that John is pointing to. And John says, do you think I want to compete with this man?

[17 : 10] That we are just two different prophets of God? Not at all. Listen to the evidence I'm giving you. I was given a job by God from heaven to tell you he is God's king.

He is the Christ. He is the Messiah. And then in verse 29, he switches the metaphor around. And he says, Jesus is like a bridegroom. And I am just the best man.

And this is a picture used again and again in the Bible. That it's a picture of the way God loves his people. The way God will be joined to his people.

And the prophets of the Old Testament had looked forward to this wonderful day when God and his people would come together truly. Because his people would be made clean and ready for him.

And all through the New Testament, that image is used again and again as well. Let me just read a few words from Ephesians. In the middle of discussion on how husbands should love their wives.

[18 : 10] Paul says, That's the clean cleansing.

That's the dispute about purification right there in those verses. So that he might present the church to himself in splendor. Without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

So that she might be holy and without blemish. In other words, John the Baptist is telling his disciples, You have it completely wrong.

Jesus has come to purify for himself a people. Like a bride. To be joined in everlasting love to God through himself. In other words, we don't just have Jesus bringing us to God.

In God, in Jesus, we are joined to God. That's what that marriage symbolism is all about. John was there helping people get ready for this husband.

[19 : 08] But now here is the one who can make us pure. And then when we believe in him, we are joined to him. Not just till death do us part. But through the very resurrection that you will unite us to him forever.

And so John stands back. He's given his evidence. This one is the goal of life. The one with whom we will live in love for eternity.

As well as simply the way to life. Thirdly, Jesus is the witness to life. 31 to 36. These verses really sum up the whole chapter.

Jesus is like absolutely no one else. He is, it says, above all. Verse 31. He's not a prophet. He's not merely a teacher sent from God.

And if we treat him as merely those things, we are lost. And 31 tells us that every teacher, every prophet, every religious leader speaks in an earthly way.

[20 : 13] Yes, the prophets have passed on God's real, true words by the power of God's spirit. But this one, this is a man from heaven itself. Like no one else. He bears witness.

He bears witness. And he gives testimony firsthand. Eyewitness testimony about reality itself. And so we have to receive him. He speaks, 33, the very words of God.

And to acknowledge him is to acknowledge God's own truth. Whereas to deny him is to call God a liar. 34. 34. He utters the words of God.

And why? Well, many prophets have been given enough of God's Holy Spirit for their task in their time. But the Father has poured out the Spirit without measure on this one.

In unending love since before the dawn of time, God the Father has been pouring out the Holy Spirit on the Son. He is immersed in the Father's love and truth. So what he says comes direct from God himself.

[21 : 17] And the Father, verse 35, has given him everything to possess and to rule. So we face a choice when we're faced with Jesus Christ. And humanity divides into two halves when we respond to him.

Will we accept his testimony? Will we accept who he says he is? Will we accept this love gift of the Father, this Son of his, this bridegroom? And this messenger from heaven?

The one on whom the Spirit, God's Spirit, is poured out? Or will we turn from him? And in the process, turn from God and life and hope and go back into the darkness?

Finally, John sums up in verse 36. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.

Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life. But the wrath of God remains on him. Because of these things, Jesus is the gift of life, the goal of life, the witness to life.

[22 : 17] And that is the truth that stands before us today. And so if we reject this, if we disobey his word, then we are still under the anger that Jesus came to rescue us from.

If we refuse to accept his testimony and choose instead to live life our way instead of his way. If we refuse the call, the rescue, then we do not receive the forgiveness he came to give.

But if we believe we have life, not we hope that perhaps when we get to heaven, God will be nice and let us in. No, we have life. We have it now.

We have it fully. We have it absolutely. We have it irreversibly. We have life. We are secure the moment we believe. The moment we take these words of testimony and accept them.

We have accepted Jesus Christ himself who is life. And so if you are not a Christian, then I beg you to take these words and think about them and to accept them.

[23 : 21] Or if you are not ready to do that, perhaps you don't understand or you are not sure what you think, then don't reject the light without looking at what it really is.

Come talk to us. Read through John's gospel with us. Hear this evidence, this testimony about Jesus and what he is and what he does and why he came.

Because as I prayed at the beginning, these words are the most serious things in the universe about the deepest realities of human life. We've got to take them seriously.

And if you are a Christian, then read these words with joy. Because Christ has brought you life. He has brought you life that will last through all the troubles and tribulations and weakness and temptations that you face right now.

He's God's gift of love to you. Gift of life. He's your future, your bridegroom, your love, your hope of life. And he has come to give you witness to that life which he is himself.

[24 : 31] Let's pray. Lord, we cannot begin to fathom how deep this love is.

Which led you to send your son for us. To live and to die for us. And it is wonderful. Help us not to underestimate the depth and the wonder of the truths here.

And help us to grasp onto life. And I thank you that you sent your son to grasp onto us. Amen.