

THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION

John 3:14-21

Christ related an Old Testament story to teach Nicodemus the way of salvation. He said: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." The children of Israel were bitten by fiery serpents and were dying. God told Moses to make a brazen serpent and lift it up on a pole. Then all who looked to that serpent were healed. Notice what these people had to do. They did not rub ointment on their sores; they did not minister to others who had been bitten; they did not make an offering to the serpent on the pole; they did not pray to this serpent; they did not look to Moses. They just had to look to the brazen serpent in faith and beyond that serpent to God. So Christ said, "I am going to be lifted up. Look unto me and be ye saved." That is the simple way of salvation. Christ was lifted up on a cross. When you and I look to Him by faith, we are saved. Christ has been lifted. It is up to us to do the looking, and it is up to Him to do the saving.

Nowhere in all divine revelation is the message of grace and love more fully or more beautifully revealed than in John 3:16-17. No greater message was ever given to the world than the one given by Christ in these words. The first of these verses has been called "the gospel in miniature," and it well deserves the title. As far as language can express it, the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of the love of God are here unfolded.

God's love is here announced in such wonderful simplicity, and yet with such unfathomable grace, that it seems to be presumptuous to try to make this passage plainer. No words are needed to enhance the wonder and the glory of this love. God's love is universal, unchanging, unfailing, and unending. It is infinite, inexpressible, incomprehensible, immeasurable, inexhaustible, and illimitable.

God has made a wonderful provision for our greatest need, which is the salvation of our souls. His love was the source from whence came this gracious provision. Salvation originated in God's love, and was wrought out by His Son. It is made effectual through personal faith. His love has been manifested to the end that all who will may have eternal life. God's love has rescued multitudes from despair, brought hope into their hearts, and influenced them to put their trust in Christ and depend on Him alone for salvation. The acceptance of Christ means the reception of eternal life.

Christ was not sent into the world for the condemnation of men, but for the salvation of those who were already condemned. In salvation there is deliverance from sin -- its guilt, condemnation, power, and effects.

If one has not believed on Christ, the verdict is rendered, and he is condemned already. The Judge gives the reason for His judgment of the unbeliever, namely, "because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." One who hears the gospel of Christ and will not believe on Him commits spiritual suicide. Nobody has any right to commit suicide, either physical or spiritual. One who refuses the salvation which has been offered to him, upon the condition of repentance and faith, simply confirms himself in his own prior state of condemnation. Only through believing on Christ, or receiving Him as Saviour, will condemnation be lifted. It is either condemnation or salvation. Which is it in your case?

In the company of His disciples Christ left Jerusalem and returned into the rural district of Judea. He spent considerable time in that area. While there He baptized, not in person but through the agency of His disciples. At the same time John the Baptist was continuing his ministry farther to the north. People came to him from every direction, professed repentance, and were baptized. But little by little the crowds left John the Baptist and resorted to Christ.

Witnessing the disciples of John the Baptist forsaking him and going to Christ, some of the followers of the forerunner, who were jealous of the success of their leader, came to John the Baptist and said: "Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou hast borne witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him."

The answer of John the Baptist to those who sought to make him jealous was superb, and I want you to notice it. He said, "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven." It is well for us to remember that no man can receive anything unless it is given to him from heaven. Whatever you have, it has been given to you, and you ought to thank God for it. John the Baptist went on to explain: "I heralded the coming of Christ, I baptized Him, and I pointed Him out to others as the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of men." He rejoiced greatly that he had been able to do what he had been sent to do. God had given him a ministry, and he had completed the assignment, and he rejoiced in that fact. He then spoke the sentence which should be the motto of every child of God in relation to Christ: "He must increase, but I must decrease." Thus John the Baptist became the supreme exponent of the fine art of taking second place for the good of the cause of Christ. His spirit, as revealed by this statement, earned for him the title of the greatest son of a human father and mother.

Only three other characters in the Scriptures deserve honorable mention along with him. Samuel, the last judge of Israel, gave way to Saul, the first king, and stepped down and out from high office unembittered and with the best wishes for his successor. And there is Jonathan, the knightliest soul of the militant days of Israel, jeopardizing with superb abandon his succession to the throne; and all because in honor and love he preferred David to a crown. Likewise Barnabas, the big-hearted disciple, who in the beginning of Paul's career as a Christian stood sponsor for him, introduced him, endorsed him, and then stepped into the shadow of the greatest apostle Christ ever had.

How did John the Baptist manage to display the heroism of self-effacement?

1. His life was rooted in God.

If one's life is not rooted in God, it is a terrible thing to see other people get the prize on which you had set your heart. If your life is not rooted in God, it is hard to live in a world that sometimes deals out such crushing disappointments of your dreams.

2. He saw something in Christ which he did not possess.

John the Baptist knew that he was a sinner like the folk to whom he preached, but that Jesus Christ did not have sin in Him.

3. He saw that it did not matter who did the work, as long as it was done properly.

His attitude was this -- What difference does it make about John the Baptist, if God gets the glory? What counts the messenger, if only the message goes home? It does not matter who does the work, as long as it is done in God's way and under His direction. Is Christ in you gaining ground? Is self in you retreating from the field? "He must increase, but I must decrease." Is it happening in your life?

Of Christ John wrote, "He that cometh from heaven is above all." Christ is the physician of souls. He does not find a case that baffles Him. He is the only physician for wounded souls. Christ is the sum of all loveliness. Whatever a soul desires is found in Him. Christ is the desire of all nations. Has Christ the supreme place in your desires? Christ is the Lord of glory.