

The Vindication of God

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

¹⁸“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

In a world with so many products, so many channels, so many flavours, so many choices, it is hard for people to believe that there can be only one true religion. Your own experience of plural choices in foods, sports, entertainment, clothing fashions, cars, gadgets, brands, makes it seem that this is the way reality is. So we transfer that to religion, faith, and eternity. We reason, it must be that there are plural ways of reaching God, many different options, many different paths, plural styles, plural forms that religion and worship takes, but we're all really doing the same thing.

That's a comforting kind of thought, because it means it is impossible to get it wrong about God. It consoles us that we're all more or less on the right path. People who defend this kind of pluralism will sometimes put it this way, “What about those who have never heard of Jesus? How can God demand that people believe in Jesus, and then condemn them because they cannot believe in Him through sheer ignorance?”

And we have to admit that we all feel the force of those arguments. Not only because it does seem unfair, if it is the case that people can be condemned for something that doesn't seem to be their fault, but also because we all live in this pluralist world and wonder if it isn't the case that there are many paths up the same mountain.

We probably could never have answered those questions if it were not for the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth was a historical person who actually lived, whose words and deeds were recorded by eyewitnesses. We know what He said about religion, about knowing God, about whether there are many ways to God. One of the most important of those statements is here in John 3:16-21.

It comes at the end of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, who was trying to see if Jesus was on his side, the side of the Pharisees. Jesus promptly explained to him that no one is on God's side who has not been reborn from above, by the washing of regeneration. People who don't have that will perish; people who do will have eternal life. That's quite exclusive, not very inclusive. Only the reborn see or enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus then began explaining both the divine and human sides of this. From the divine side, it is a sovereign act of God. From the human side, people must look to God's Son as their life, as the ancient Israelites looked to the bronze snake for physical life. People must see the Son lifted up on the Cross, and lifted up in resurrected glory, and place their hope and trust in Him, and so have everlasting life. Again, if they don't, they perish. This sounds exclusive, not inclusive.

Now that is very harsh to most ears. When people hear that, they accuse God of being unloving, while making out that people are kind, loving, well-meaning seekers. God becomes guilty and people are innocent. God is the evil actor in this drama; humans are the honest-hearted seekers.

Verses 16-21 are like a defence of this exclusivism, helping us to understand, is this fair? Is it just? It is not that God needs defending. But for the honest heart who is confused about whether it can be

the case that there is one way Jesus helps us to see four truths, in two pairs. He shows us God's attitude to the world, and God's action to the world. He then turns it around and shows the world's attitude to God, and the world's action toward God. We can then decide if this exclusive way is fair.

I. God's Attitude to the World is Saving Love

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Maybe the first thing that goes on trial when it comes to debates about religion and salvation is God's love. How could a God of love send people to Hell? If God really loves people, why would He allow evil? In other words, the charge is something like this: God doesn't love people. He has some other agenda.

But here, in one of the most well-known verses of the Bible, we read that God loved the world. That means that God took pleasure in His creation, mankind, He desired their good, their blessedness, their flourishing. God's heart for the race of Adam is not that they fall further into decay and ruin, but that they return to being glorious image-bearers of God, that they live in fullness of joy. God's heart is to see us in fulness of joy.

And even more, there is the little word “so”. God *so* loved the world. What that means is, God loved the world in such a way that He... This much did God love the world, that He.

What did He do? The extent of God's love for the world of mankind is shown in what God did. John 3:16 tells us that God gave. Love must give out of itself to the beloved. Sometimes it gives the beloved time. Sometimes it gives the beloved things and gifts. Sometimes it gives the beloved service. Sometimes it gives the beloved affection and tenderness. Sometimes it gives the beloved kind words. But love always goes out of yourself to your beloved to beautify them. God did not merely know or feel love. God's love went out to us to meet a need, to provide us with blessing.

What was that gift? Think of it. God had already given us the whole created world. He made this planet of delights, filled with joys incomparable, and made the race of Adam the kings and custodians over all of it. He had given us His creation. The only greater gift than a whole cosmos of creatures would be to give us the Creator, to give us Himself. That's what John 3:16 says He gave.

He gave His only begotten Son. This is why John wrote that whole prologue of chapter 1:1-18, so we could understand who this Son is, and what it means that He is the only begotten. He was in the beginning with God, He was with God, and He was God. He is from the Father, the one and only, unique, eternally generated, second person of the eternal Trinity. He, the delight of God the Father, and the joy of God the Spirit, was given to the world. God gave of Himself.

How was He given? He is given to the world in the way verses 14-15 showed us. Moses constructed a bronze snake that was lifted up in the sight of the people so that people who were forsaking their rebellion and accepting God's mercy could now live. The Son, as we know from the rest of the Bible, is given as a sacrifice for us: a perfect Life for sinners, a substitutionary death for sinners. God gave of Himself for those who had rejected Him.

God loved the world so much, that He gave up His Son to save rebels, to save treacherous creatures, to save those who had rejected Him. God gave His best to save the worst.

Now before people begin saying, “How could God send people to hell?” or “Why would a God of

love do this or that?" first answer the question, why did Jesus come? If God were not a God of love, would we ever have had the Gospel of Jesus dying and rising for our sins? Has God provided men with mercy? Imagine the anti-John 3:16. "For God so hated the world, that He withheld His only begotten Son, that everyone should not have eternal life, but perish."

That isn't the case. Instead, His love has intervened. Verse 17 goes deeper and explains God's action to the world.

II. God's Action to the World Is Sending Light

For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Verse 17 begins with *for* which means it is explaining and developing that thought from verse 16. Another way of saying verse 16 is with verse 17: God did not send His Son for the purpose of condemning the world, but for the purpose of saving it. God was not trying catch the world out, trying to trick the world, trying to judge the world by a sneak attack.

How do we know? Because verse 18 is going to tell us that the world is already condemned. God didn't have to do anything more. Men had inflicted condemnation on themselves, become guilty and increased their guilt. Jesus did not come to persecute and prosecute, but to seek and to save. The Son's appearance was a rescue mission of love. Jesus is rightly called the Saviour.

But he is not a hidden Saviour, He is a visible, public Saviour. Look at the image used for Jesus in verse 19 ¹⁹And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²

Jesus is Light. You will remember from chapter 1, the image used for the Saviour Son. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (John 1:5)
That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. (John 1:9)

Jesus is Light. Now the nature of light is that it is visible. You can see it, and you can see because of it. Jesus came to be seen and to enable you to see. God sent His Son so that people might see themselves properly, see God properly, and be saved. This is God's action: sending light.

John writes in these pairs. God wants people not to perish, but have everlasting life. God wants people not to be condemned, but to be saved. God wants not to hide answers and reality from people, but to reveal it. The default state is that God wants people to see light and be saved.

But what about the great problem? How can Jesus be the Light that lights every man coming into the world if not every man in the world has heard of Jesus? The answer is that Jesus is the Light in more than one way. You remember that John 1 also told us that Jesus the Word was the Creator of all things, and that all things were made by Him. That means that in the witness of creation, men see the light of Christ. They see that creation has been made, fashioned, designed by a Creator who is powerful, wise, and kind. This is light.

Inside themselves as creations, humans find a conscience distinguishing between good and evil, a mind guided by reason and logic, the ability to think in words and understand language and meaning, pointing to us being made in the image of God. This is light.

And even more fundamental than that, humans have an implanted knowledge of God, according to Romans 1:19, what the theologians have called a *sensus divinitus*. This is light.

As they look at culture, they see humans as groups worshipping, making religions and belief

systems and philosophies and art forms to express transcendent ideas. This is light. The four “C’s” of creation, conscience, consciousness of God, culture are all ways that the light of Christ has shone on all men everywhere. It is light revealed generally.

But is this light enough to save people? Not on its own, no. But in Christian history, several people have held to a doctrine known as universal sending. This was widely discussed during the Middle Ages, held by people like Peter of Abelard, Bonaventure, Dante. It was later held by Jacob Arminius. It is the notion that if someone seriously seeks after God, then God will see to it that they receive the message of the gospel in some way. We see examples of this in Scripture. The Ethiopian eunuch was seeking, and God sent him Philip. Cornelius was seeking, and God sent him Peter. People who respond to the light they have by approaching it, receive more light.

So now our attention must shift to mankind. God's attitude is saving love and sending light. But what is the world's attitude?

III. The World's Attitude Towards God Is Hatred of His Light

¹⁹And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

The real guilt, the real offence according to verse 19 is this: God sent light, and men loved darkness. God has given lots of light. The C's of general revelation: creation, conscience, consciousness, culture. The C's of special revelation: the covenants, the canon of Scripture, the church, and the Incarnate Christ. The problem is not ignorance. The problem is not that mankind does not have the truth that he needs to find God, the information, the clarity. The problem is not that man is true seeker, who lacks knowledge.

No, the problem, according to Jesus is that mankind knows that the light of Christ is in the world. All men have seen the light of general revelation. Some have seen the light of both general and special. But here is the great indictment. God so loved the world, but the world so hated God's light.

Just think about any experience you have had with trying to show people the light of God in creation, or their own conscience. Think of what people do when you point them to the light of Christ in the Word. Do they love it? Do they welcome it? Do they ask for more? Do they rush toward the light?

Think of what evolutionists do when the light of God's intelligent design is shone on the work they are doing. Think of what scientists do when confronted with the light of creation. Think of what anthropologists do when they see the light of God's image in human nature, or human culture. Do they love it? Embrace? Follow that light wherever it leads? Think of how people react when you bring the Bible into the conversation.

Never think that the issue between God and man is ignorance. The issue is love or hate. Men have enough light to lead them, but they do not love that light. They actually hate it. They wish to avoid it, not see it, extinguish it. We are told why at the end of verse 19: because their deeds were evil.

That leads to the fourth thing.

IV. The World's Action Toward God Is Avoiding of His Light

²⁰For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

This is why you hate the light if you do hate it. Light exposes you. If what you are doing is evil, shameful, ugly, reprehensible, then you want to do it in the dark. You don't want it called out, exposed, revealed as evil.

And that shows something about you. This indicts you as guilty, because you know what the light will do; and you know what the light will expose. This means you are not doing evil accidentally or ignorantly. You wish to mask what you are doing. You don't come to God not because you don't know that He is there, not because you don't understand Him, but because you know what you are doing with your life is wrong, and you don't want to be convicted. You don't want to feel guilty, even if you are.

People can't find God in exactly the same way that thieves can't find policeman. People can't find God in the same way that murderers can't find detectives. There is deliberate avoidance. The words in Romans 1:18 is that people by their wickedness suppress the truth (Romans 1:18)

Now again, this is why verse 18 tells us that people who do not believe are already condemned. You don't need to wait for the Day of Judgement to be condemned as guilty. You are already in a state of indicted condemnation. The verdict is already pronounced on yourself by your own hating the light and avoiding it.

You are the car fleeing from the police. A car fleeing from pursuing police is guilty twice: first of the original crime, and now of resisting arrest. When we see a car that won't pull over for police, we can basically assume the guilt of those avoiding the police. Unbelief in either general revelation or special is avoiding light, because of guilt.

So what does it take for someone to come to the light?

But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

When God is at work in you, and you come to desire truth: reality, even if it hurts. You want to know the facts about God and about yourself, even if the guilt and the conviction and the shame burns. But you want truth. You want to really deal with God as He is, and accept what He says about you.

Now Jesus doesn't tell us how this happens inwardly, that someone goes from being an evil doer to a truth-doer. He'll explain more of that in some of His future conversations. But here we see the result. If you are a truth-doer, then you come to the light. And that means you believe. And that means, according to verse 16, you have everlasting life, and will not perish. It means, according to verse 17 and 18, that you are saved, and not condemned.

If you believe, then you experience what God meant for you and meant for the world: being saved, experiencing eternal life. But if you do not believe in the name of the only begotten, if you reject God's gift of Himself then you are already condemned.

So now we're in a position to decide who is guilty and who is innocent. Today's pluralist world says, human beings are good people searching for answers. They love truth, but there are just so many people claiming truth. So people can't be blamed for choosing different religions, paths, because there are so many options, and people can't tell them apart. God would be very unfair, and very unkind to make us choose, and condemn us for choosing the wrong one.

Jesus, the Son of God says, God does not want to condemn the world. He loves His creation, and

sent His very best into the world to save it. His attitude is love, and His action was to send light. But the problem is not that it is confusing; the problem is that human nature hates any light that convicts them, and chronically avoids it. They don't want God's light or love, if it will expose them. They will keep avoiding it, they will protect themselves from God's love and light, as long as they can keep doing what they want to do and not feel guilty. Until God works in them to become truth-doers, until they choose to open their eyes, it does not matter how much light, how bright the light, they will evade and avoid.

So tell me now, who between God and man is filled with love, and who is filled with hate? Who is seeking truth and reality, and who is hiding and obscuring things? Who is being honest, fair and openhanded, and who is being deceitful, duplicitous and false? Who is being unfair?

Yes, we do live in a reality of absolutes. Despite all the pluralistic choices you have, you still live in a world of light or darkness, love or hate, evil deeds or God-enabled deeds, condemnation or salvation, perishing or eternal life. And these absolutes come down to a very exclusive, binary choice: avoid the light, and keep living your own life, or come to the light of Christ, look, believe on Him and experience life.