**For God So Loved the World**

John 3:16-36
Key Verse 3:16 – *“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.”*

In the Bible, there are approximately 31,102 verses in total (more specifically 23,145 verses in the Old Testament and 7,957 verses in the New Testament). There are verses that reveal the very beginnings of the world and some others that illustrate its end. There are verses that describe interesting places while others describe even more interesting faces. There are verses of incredible adventures and miraculous victories in spite of overwhelming odds… but there are just as many of arduous journeys and lifelong suffering due to man’s own folly. There are verses that we look toward for comfort, guidance and inspiration while some others we ignore for they do not fit in our own expectations. There are so many verses in the Bible to choose from but for today, I would like to focus on the one verse that encapsulates everything that is written in the other 31,101. This verse speaks of the love our Heavenly Father has lavished upon us through Jesus Christ and it is through Him that we have been gifted new life to be used in His service and for His glory. I pray we may really come to accept His love personally, how life changing it is and how we are to live with the joy that comes with it.

**Part 1: God Reveals His Love through His Son, Jesus Christ**

Before we look at today’s passage, we need to briefly review the events of the earlier portion of it. In it we encountered Nicodemus, a man who by our own worldly standards seemed to have it all (great job, high social standing, respected by everyone) yet he came to Jesus in the secrecy of night in search of answers to his spiritual longings. Even though he was a member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus recognized Jesus as a man of God and maybe hoped Jesus would impart some great spiritual truth and wisdom to him. However, Jesus knew the heart of the problem and told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again to enter the kingdom of God, being baptized by water and the Spirit (3:5). Only by doing so would Nicodemus begin to understand a fraction of Jesus’ teachings. Jesus then gave an example from Israel’s history of the bronze snake that God had instructed the Israelites to look up towards in order to be saved from their sin of rebelliousness. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that, in the same way, the Son of Man would be lifted up so that whoever looked towards Him and believes would have eternal life (3:15). Nicodemus had just received a graduate-level lesson on the Holy Spirit from the only person in the world qualified to speak on this subject. This teaching alone would be enough for Nicodemus to immediately go home and ponder upon for the rest of his life but Jesus still had something even more profound to say. In doing so, Jesus gave us arguably the most important verse in the entire Bible.

May we read verse 16 together; ***“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.”*** The great theologian Martin Luther once referred to John 3:16 as “the essence of the gospel.” Many view this verse as a summary of the entire Bible and it is a verse many Christians know by heart. There are many attributes of God which the Bible tells us of such as God’s holiness, righteousness, justice, faithfulness, compassion, mercy, kindness, generosity, infinity, eternity, omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, and even more names and titles that reflect them. But the most important of them all is love. The love that is described here is not the romantic kind (“*eros*”) that rises quickly yet, with a word, evapourates or turns to hatred just as suddenly. It is also neither the love we share together as friends (“*phileo*”) nor even the pinnacle of human love shared between parent and child (“*storge*”). Instead, the love that Jesus speaks of is “*agape*”; the perfect, divine and self-sacrificial love that God has poured out on us.

It is not easy to love someone and it is safe to say, we have all experienced how painfully difficult it can be to love even those who are closest to us. By our human nature, we are far from lovable. We are quick to point out the sins and flaws of others but always look at ourselves in the most favourable light. Our hearts are filled with every form of greed, lust, anger, self-centeredness, shame, fear, envy, despair, indifference and pride. However, the Scriptures go even further than that in expressing just how terrible we are. From the very moment man turned their hearts away from God in Genesis, our ways are so wicked and our souls so sin-sick that we are all fully deserving of God’s wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 6:23a). There is absolutely nothing good in us or about us that warrants God’s love and there is nothing we can ever do to be deserving of it. Yet by His grace, God gave us His Son Jesus to come into our lives and reveal the full extent of His love. From when God created us, He filled us with His love. He sees every one of us as His blessed children and desires nothing more than to draw us to His side. If any of us had someone who loved us that much, wouldn’t we immediately run towards them, embrace them and want to simply stay with them forever? Sadly, we do not for we often think of ourselves as unlovable or undesirable. Whether it be out of insecurity, fear, shame or self-loathing, we find ourselves unable to accept God’s love. Yet God still treasures us above everything else in this world and willingly sacrificed everything to show us.

Growing up, my youngest sister had a stuffed mouse. It was her first doll that was exclusively her own and as kids usually do, she did everything with it. She would talk to it, play outside with it and sleep with it. It was always dirty and a little bit smelly. It has several holes in it and over time lost its eyes, its nose and all its whiskers. My mother threatened to throw it out so many times because it was broken beyond all repair. But it was worth more to my sister than anything else in the world because she truly loved it. Though everyone thought of it as junk, she treasured it like nothing else. Though she didn’t enjoy it, she learned to sew solely for the sake of fixing it, gave it new stuffing and made every effort to preserve it. My sister is now an adult… but she still has that mouse (it even has a Facebook profile we made for it)! Likewise, we too are worthwhile because God loves us. Sometimes, we despise ourselves, saying, “God cannot possibly love me. I am no good.” But God loves us not because we are worth it, or lovable, but because He Himself is love. He wishes to stitch together all our broken parts together again and give us a new Spirit to make us whole again. He seeks to cleanse us of all our sins that make us dirty and untouchable, and present us radiantly and without stain, wrinkle or blemish (Galatians 5:27). And this is all out of His amazing love for us.

**Part 2: To Save the World, Not to Condemn It**

May we read verse 17 together, ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”*** Jesus bore the wrath of God and all condemnation in our place through His death on the cross for our sins (Romans 5:6-8, Galatians 3:13). And it is through His death and glorious resurrection that the way back to God has been opened and the grace of salvation is freely given to all who believe and confess Jesus as their Lord and Saviour (Ephesians 2:4-5). It is through Christ that the entire world is saved from the power of sin and death. Most depictions of the end of the world always centre on utter chaos and the complete destruction of all that we know. However, God chose to redeem and restore the world through Jesus, the culmination of this being when Jesus comes again as King and brings all nations unto Him. There is so much more that can be said but Hebrews 4:14-16 perfectly summarizes how we as Christians should respond to this: ***“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*** How amazing is this? It is amazing beyond all words.

Unfortunately, there are some who do not find this amazing. May we read verse 18 together, ***“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”*** They see no need to believe in God nor believe in Jesus’ death for their sins and will often refute these claims by posing a questions like, “If God loves the world so much, why does He send good people to Hell?” or “If God loves me so much, why am I condemned already? Can’t he just love me as I am?” This is often due to certain misconceptions we have about ourselves and about God. As mentioned earlier, there is no such thing as a good person for we all fall short of God’s standard (Romans 3:23) so this speaks more about our own self-righteousness. Second is that God has no desire to punish people. As Ezekiel 33:11a clearly states, ***“‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.’”*** Being loved by God does not mean we are exempt from all consequences of our sins but rather He wants to save us from the condemnation that come as a result of our sins. A way to illustrate this is by thinking of ourselves in a boat that has sprung a few leaks. No matter how many holes we cover or how much water we scoop out, the water continues to fill the boat. And much like condemnation, we are slowly sinking to our graves. However, Jesus throws a lifeline towards us and asks us simply to grab on. So how will we respond? Will we accept Jesus’ saving grace and pull towards Him? Or will we insist that we can still save ourselves and uselessly keep plugging holes and scooping out water? Only through believing in the name of Jesus are we saved from our sins that lead to death and eternal separation from our Heavenly Father.

Ultimately, Jesus reveals the main reason people reject Him; it is that we love the darkness and do not want our sins to be exposed for all the world to see out of fear and shame (verses 19 and 20). But for those who have truly accepted His love, grace and forgiveness, they are able to stand in the light and testify to how Christ has saved them from the darkness of their sins and leads them into His marvelous light (verse 21).

**Part 3: He Must Become Greater, I Must Become Less**

With His late-night Bible Study with Nicodemus now over, the scene shifts swiftly to the Judean countryside where Jesus and His disciples spent time together and baptized people (verse 23). This did not sit well with some of John’s disciples who, after an argument about ceremonial washing, brought it to John’s attention that many people were going to Jesus to be baptized instead of John. The once-popular ministry of John the Baptist now seemed in sharp decline. It would understandable for John to feel a certain sense of loss as his ministry grew smaller while Jesus’ began to blossom. However, John's reply in verses 27-36 contains several important teachings. First is that John accepted God’s sovereignty over his ministry. Verses 27-28 read, ***“To this John replied, ‘A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, “I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.”’”*** John knew that everything comes from God and that is especially true for the ministry. Therefore, we should not see our ministry from a human point of view, always comparing it with others. Each ministry comes from God and has its own value. Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like to join another more appealing ministry where I could meet a lot more other students and not have to come for so many 1-to-1 Bible study or fellowship meetings. My responsibilities would be non-existent and I could just not show up whenever I didn’t feel like attending or I had lots of studying to do. However, the more I think about it, the more I see how it has been a blessing for me to be here at St. George UBF as I really got to know Jesus and His love personally through all those Bible study sessions and learned even more through serving and co-working with everyone here. Much like John’s ministry, ours has a unique role to fill on this campus and I really pray God may continue to use us to be a blessing for the University of Toronto, Ryerson and all campuses across the world.

Second is that John knew the secret of joy. He said, ***“The bride belongs to the bridegroom.”*** Jesus is the bridegroom and His church is His bride. John was like the “best man” at the wedding. When the bridegroom is united to his bride, the best man observes from a distance and shares the bridegroom’s joy. John was full of joy when people came to Jesus. He concluded by saying, ***“He must become greater; I must become less.”*** John did not fall into sorrow as he became less and less while Jesus was exalted. Rather, he was full of joy because to him, Jesus was always came first. We find many people these days who share the same joy John had in exalting Jesus. Some have formed a movement called “I am second,” and have a website “Iamsecond.com.” It contains many testimonies of people who met Jesus personally, put Him first in their lives, placing themselves second, and found true joy as a result. When we put ourselves first, many miseries and sorrows come but when Jesus is first, we experience joy in its fullest (Matthew 6:33), remembering that the source of all our joy stems from the love God has shown us through Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, we learned how Jesus revealed God’s love for the world and His incredible desire to save us. People were made to love and be loved and God has shown us the way to do so through Jesus. It is my hope that we really seek God, turn to Him and be filled by His love. I pray we may receive the love of God in all its richness and fullness so we may serve the world with it in all the ways He has planned for us.