

Who is Jesus?

Messages from the Gospel of John

Message 1

His Purpose John 3:16

Introduction

Did you all have a good time this summer? I know Danny Greenawalt did. He traveled all over the country videotaping kids at summer camps. Our family had a lot going on, with visits from a French and an English student in addition to our regular summer activities. But there was a black shadow over our summer, for we had a death in the family. Now, it wasn't as bad as you might think, because the deceased was Cinderella, our bunny. But there are some here who have experienced the loss of dear human friends in the past few months. I suppose you did not come out here tonight to hear me talk about death – for death is a subject we love to avoid. It is a gruesome subject, which disrupts our happy college experience. But it is unavoidable. Some of us have experienced this vividly, but it is true for us all. Tonight's passage, however, gives us the solution to death, and all the sorrow that comes with it. This verse in John tells us how to escape death and live forever!

God Loves the World

First we are told that God loves the world. This verse occurs in the context of a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Jewish teacher. The Jews at that time were looking for a Messiah, someone to deliver them from their Roman rulers, but they were not thinking that this Messiah would care much about anyone else. *They* were God's chosen people, *they* lived in the land that had God's laws, *they* were the nation which had God's temple. The other nations were unclean: ceremonially disgusting and religiously repulsive. Jews had as little interaction as possible with Gentiles (non-Jews).

They were like some people today, who are satisfied with their own friends and care nothing about others. We have white people who couldn't care about the problems faced by black people, and black people who are angry at the rise of Asians in our society, and Hispanics who are demanding their own share of the American dream. We have middle and upperclass people who have college degrees and good jobs – and never think about the plight of the poor in our decaying cities. We have parents who are so consumed with advancing their careers and maintaining their bodies that they have little time for their children – and children who resent their parents and live in their own world of their teen peer group. Folks, the simple reality is that people have a natural tendency to love only their friends. We are by nature selfish.

But God is not like that at all. God loves the whole world – the good, the bad; the beautiful, the ugly; the rich, the poor; the smart, the dumb; the religious, the profane – God loves a world made up of all sorts of people. Some people think that God is a moral tyrant. They think He is a superhuman version of a nasty school teacher, pacing around the classroom, looking for any students passing notes or chewing gum, so she can yank them out of their seat and haul them off for punishment. Or perhaps God is an evil parent, lurking in the corner of your house to see if you are doing anything fun, so he can pounce on you and make you quit. Now it would be wrong of me and horribly misguided to imply that God loves anything you do, or that there are not important moral issues. God is the standard of right and wrong, and He is interested in whether we obey Him or not. But even in addressing moral issues, God still loves us.

God is not an evil tyrant. He loves the world. This love for the world is fundamental to all that God does, and propels Him toward the most astonishing act in all of history.

God Gives Eternal Life

Our verse goes on to tell us the outcome of God's love. God's love is so great, so wonderful, that

He gives us eternal life. Now, I know that this does not have a huge audience appeal today. If I ran an ad in the *Brown and White*, offering eternal life at a certain time and place – the same time as a performance by the Dave Matthews Band – I know that very few would pay me any interest. This is because of a very profound misunderstanding about life.

Most people think that they have life. You might remember the definition of life you learned in high school biology class – something that can reproduce, move, eat, react to the environment, etc. – and sure enough, the last time you looked, you qualify! We think of life as something we possess. But scripture presents a very different view of life. Life is a characteristic of God, not of creatures. Next week we will study the first chapter of John, where it is said, “In Him (i.e. Jesus) was life.” (John 1:4) Paul said to the men of Athens, “In Him we live and move and have our being,” (Acts 17:28a) and he wrote to the church at Colossae, “By Him all things were created...and in Him all things consist.” (Col. 1:16-17) You see, life is not a substance that was poured into you at conception, it is an energy that comes directly from God.

Sometimes we are misled by a flawed conception of the universe. We think of it as a majestic machine that operates according to universal laws. This is true, as far as it goes, but it leads us to think of God as the originator only. A better concept of the universe is of a fountain. A fountain is a real, tangible object, yet it ceases to exist as soon as the power to the pump is turned off. This is how our universe is. All that we see, even our own lives, is sustained by the continual outpouring of God’s energy. Our life is not something we possess, but the result of God’s constant energy running through us.

Now we can see that life, at least for our purposes, is better described as a connection to God. At conception, God initiated a stream of energy into you which has continued to this day. Whether you feel it or not, even if you do not admit it, even when you try to separate yourself from God, He is always there keeping you alive. Even when you sin and rebel against Him, He gives you the energy to rebel! Now it should be easy to see that death is simply the point at which God stops giving you life. Death is when He withholds His energy from you. Just like the fountain when the pump is stopped, you crumple in death. Death is when God severs the connection between you that makes you alive.

The wonderful promise in this verse is that you may have eternal life. That is, your connection with God will never be interrupted. It is true that your body will cease to function and decay, but God will be with you continuously and will give you a new stage of life in a new body. This is eternal life.

The Nature of Eternal Life

But eternal life is much more than merely a longer span of existence – it is a different *quality* of life. We westerners, and especially we engineers, when we hear the word eternal, instinctively think in quantitative terms. Eternal life also involves a different *type* of relation with God. When we are born, our relationship with God is simply of receiving the energy He gives. But as we grow, we are faced with choices in how we respond to God. God is a person, you know, like your father and your roommate. God is not a divine force, or a moral impulse, or a universal constant, but a person who lives and loves and thinks and remembers. He is not a *human* person – He is divine, but He is a person nevertheless. And the biggest issue in your life is the kind of relationship you have with Him.

And here we come to the biggest problem of all. You do admit, don’t you, that your relationship with God has been pretty rocky at times. The crux of the problem is that God, as creator, claims the right to rule the world, including your life. And we find that we resent God’s intrusion into our affairs. We all are children of Adam and Eve, who disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit in an effort to be like God. *You* want to be God. *You* want to run your own life. And frankly, you are angry that God interferes with your desires. In fact, you have spent much of your life avoiding God. You think that by pretending that He does not exist, or does not see you, or does not care about you, you can do as you please. But you will never get

away with it. God loves you too much to let you run off on your own.

You see, it's not that God is an evil tyrant preventing you from having any fun – He is a loving Father who is directing you to the best life possible. The great author C. S. Lewis said our problem is not that we love food and sex and pleasure too much, but that we are satisfied with too little. God calls us to full enjoyment, to true pleasure, to the best life possible, but we are willing to settle for the rubbish of human existence. He offers us gold and jewels, but we refuse to give up our plastic trinkets and pieces of colored glass. Eternal life is the god-like life that we were intended for, but rejected. And now God offers you this life again.

The Cost of Eternal Life

But this verse tells us that eternal life is not free. It costs you nothing, but God paid an awful price. It is a terrible thing to rebel against your creator, and the punishment is death. To some people that sounds harsh, but they forget that God, as creator, has the natural right to rule the earth as He wishes. So everyone who chafes at God's commands must die. But God decreed that His Son would die for us. Jesus would take the punishment that we deserve.

Can you imagine sending your own son to die for someone else? Think about it as a mother or father. You endure the trouble of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth. You suffer through years of early mornings and late nights with an helpless individual. You patiently teach him to eat, to tie his shoes, to ride a bike. You watch him grow up into a sturdy little boy and go off to school. More years of baseball games and soccer tournaments, band practice and summer camp. You struggle through the teenage years together, trying your best to help him get a good start in life. And what is it all for? To send him off to die? Can you imagine the pain of a mother or father as they watch their son pack up and ride off to the front? Think of the tension each day as they wait for the mail, wondering if they will get a letter from their beloved son, or from the army – the one welcomed, the other dreaded.

Why would you let the best years of your life, the one you love most, go to die? For a good cause, perhaps? Perhaps to defend your country. But would you send your son off to die for your enemy? Do you think that any Israelis will fight for the Palestinians? No! What an ignorant idea! They are the enemy! But this is what God did. He sent His son to die for you, even though you were rebelling against Him. In Paul's letter to the Romans we read, "Perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:7b-8)

God demonstrates His love toward us. Is there any other religion in the world in which their god died for his people? Have you ever been loved like this? Your parents love you, your friends love you – perhaps you have a boyfriend or girlfriend who loves you, but no one loves you like God loves you. If this love does not melt your heart, you must not be fully human. Why would you reject such a great love? Why would you still cling to the sad trinkets of momentary pleasure, when eternal life with the one who loves you most is yours right now.

Entrance to Eternal Life

But you know, hard as it may be to believe, there are some who reject God's love. Eternal life is yours for the asking. You do not have to perform any feats of goodness to qualify – but you must ask, and some people never do. Why? Because they do not believe. They hear God's voice and they do not listen. They say to themselves, "That is a nice message," or "I don't understand what he is saying," or any number of things, but the bottom line is that they shrug their shoulders and walk away. Ultimately, they decide that God is not telling the truth. They chose to rely on their own opinion about life.

Our verse does not say that the whole world will receive eternal life. It does not say that everyone

will not perish. It says *whoever believes* will receive it. Belief is the door to eternal life. Belief in Jesus is our entrance into the fullness of God's love.

Belief in the Bible is never mere agreement, nor is it a one-time event. Belief also is a quality of life. Some people think that if they agree with the doctrines of the church they will receive eternal life. The writers of the Bible never meant this. True belief is agreement and trust. When you believe something, you naturally act upon it. If I tell you they are giving out free computers over at Ulrich tonight at 10:00, will you believe me? If so, you will go and get one. If you claim to believe me, but choose not to go to Ulrich, how can we think that you really believe? If you believe in Jesus, you will think that He is telling the truth. So when He tells us to do something, we will do it. We believe that it is something we must do. You see, belief is never simple agreement with facts. It always involves action upon those facts.

Neither is belief a one-time event. Some people think that they have eternal life because they once decided to follow Jesus; or prayed to God, asking for salvation; or were baptized. These are important aspects of belief, but true belief is something which goes on and on. It is a quality of life, a new way of living. Belief consists of daily, moment-by-moment choices to trust Jesus. If you have been sitting here tonight thinking that you are already a Christian, that this message was for unbelievers, you are badly mistaken.

Application

This verse is vital for all of us. Everyone here must ask, "Do I believe in Jesus? Is God telling the truth when He says He loves me enough to send His Son to die for me? Is God telling the truth when He says His commands are for my good? Are there other loves in my life greater than God? Have I traded the priceless love of God for the silly trinkets of earthly pleasure?" Don't throw away God's love. Believe that He who died for you will give you all you need for real life, now and for eternity.

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