

The Way

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 2, 2021.

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. And this is the judgment: 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. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God (John 3:16-21).¹

Before Jesus celebrated his last Passover meal with his disciples, he washed their feet, including Judas' who would betray him (John 13:1-20). It is a picture not only of his humility but also his service, for he came "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). Despite its significance, it was a difficult moment for Simon Peter and the other disciples: Should they not be serving him? It seems counterintuitive that the Creator would serve the created, but he did.

Following the foot-washing, they celebrated the Passover meal together, where Jesus would point to the bread and wine, foreshadowing his death to come as well as establishing an ordinance for his church to keep. On that night Judas, the betrayer, would be revealed and depart, and Peter would learn of his forthcoming denial. It was an evening that would have disturbed the most ardent disciple, and Jesus knows it. So, he encourages them saying, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14:1) and telling them of the surety and preparation of his "Father's house" and the promise of his return (John 14:2-4). But it was all too much, especially for the cautious and confused, leading Thomas to ask on behalf of them all, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:5).

As was typical of Jesus' disciples' questions, Thomas is asking more than he knows. In that moment, he cannot imagine what is soon to follow: Jesus' persecution, his trial, his crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. Knowing this, understanding that Thomas and others are limited in what they can comprehend in that moment, Jesus draws upon the final word of Thomas' question: "How can we know *the way*?" Jesus responds, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Thomas asks for directions; Jesus points the Way.

Clearly, what Jesus means by "the Way" is different than what Thomas asks, so what does Jesus mean by it? Let's consider this question by looking back to the night that Jesus met with Nicodemus, where John, expanding on their conversation, explains first the way of God's love.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

The Way of Love

In what is likely a theological meditation upon God's gift of salvation, John writes, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." It is a statement of the exclusive way of salvation which begins not with the sinner but the love of God. As God himself is love (1 John 4:8), it is his nature to love. He who is love loves. And whom he loves, as John specifies, is "the world."

The word translated "world" (*cosmos*), as it is used in the New Testament, can mean "universe" or "the earth," but more precisely, as one scholar defines it, it is "the sum of the divine creation which has been shattered by the fall, which stands under the judgment of God, and in which Jesus appears as the Redeemer."² God's love for this fallen world is not a statement of salvation for all without exception but rather its boundaryless scope within his creation. God's love is not only for the Jew but also for the Gentile, and for "you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39).

God's love for "the world" is not in response to human merit or even faith. God does not love us because we first loved him. Quite the contrary, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God is love in and of himself, bestowing his love upon us. His love flows from his nature, and he bestows it upon the unworthy, which tells us much about our God who is love.

What God bestows in love is the gift of his "one and only Son" (NET). Specifically, God the Father gave both in sending his Son into the world *and* in sending him to the cross. He was sent to live and die as no one could or can. In doing so he embodied and revealed the love of God: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). And yet, the atonement for sin that God the Father ordained and God the Son accomplished is not applied generally or unconditionally. We are saved through the Way, and the way is through faith.

The Way through Faith

Faith then is essential to our salvation from condemnation and to eternal life: "Whoever believes in [Christ] 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." The word "condemned" may also be translated "judged," and reveals that there is no confusion between the love of God and his judgment. God so loved the world, and he reigns in judgment over it. But the one who believes in the one and only Son of God need not fear God's judgment. We who believe are justified as righteous before God *by faith* in his Son, while the unbeliever is condemned *by unbelief*.

In fact, the unbeliever's condemnation does not await Judgment Day. He or she is condemned already for not believing "in the name of the only Son of God." In other words, unbelief is not merely an absence of trust but is a denial of the revelation of Jesus personally, who he is as Lord,

² H. Sasse quoted Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 112.

what he has done as Savior. Saving faith is not merely credence, or confessing a creed, but is trusting in the person of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

If God gave his one and only Son in love and we are saved from condemnation and to eternal life through faith in him, why doesn't everyone believe? Why would anyone reject the gospel? John answers this in two ways. First, although Jesus came into the world as "the light" of God, "people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed." Engaged in sin, enjoying iniquity, sinners do what they do best, sin. Even the most noble of sinners relishes in his deeds of darkness and therefore hates the light that exposes them. Therefore, as Jesus is the light, sinners hate him because they love their sin. Or as Jesus put it, "[The world] hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil" (John 7:7). Those who live in and love the darkness hate the light, despite the fact that the Son of God is "the light of the world" (John 8:12).

Therefore, despite the love of God and the light of Christ, no one would believe apart from God's sovereign grace. He who is rich in mercy acts monergistically in love, saving us by his grace through faith (Eph. 2:4-5). No one is saved from condemnation and to eternal life apart from faith but saving faith is not something we have to give. Faith does not come from a spark ignited inside us, because we were dead in our sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1) apart from God's grace. No, faith comes from God, a gift of his grace. As Paul explains, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). Such is the love of God: He gives his Son to die for our sin *and* gives us the faith to believe in him.

The result is that through the way of faith we are enabled to live in truth, coming out of darkness and to the light, not in our own strength but in God's provision. As God loved and gave, we receive through faith the way to life.

The Way to Life

If we are saved from condemnation for sin by God's grace through faith in Christ and saved to eternal life, what is eternal life? While it may surprise some, human beings were created in the image of God to live forever. According to the creation account, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27), and God gave one commandment: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). Keep the commandment and live forever; disobey and die. They disobeyed, and so they died, but not immediately.

In fact, Adam lived to be 930 years old, but it was a life apart from Eden and separated from the tree of life. Though physically alive, they experienced spiritual death. And yet, they were created for eternal life. Therefore, when John writes that through faith in the Son, we will not "perish," he does not mean that our physical bodies will not grow old and die. Death, by virtue of Adam's sin, is a certainty, but not eternally.

For those who do not believe in the Son, they will perish in what John calls the "second death" (Rev. 20:14). It is a perishing of eternal torment. And since we were created to live forever, John

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says, “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night” (Rev. 14:11). It is a place, according to Jesus, “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). It is an eternal death of spiritual and physical consequences. But for those who believe in the Son do not perish but have eternal life, an everlasting spiritual and physical reality.

What eternal life will be like is best understood by connecting the dots between the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the New Jerusalem in Revelation. It will be an everlasting life of love and fellowship with God and his children, unadulterated by sin. Free from weeping, always worshiping, we will enjoy the perfect fulfillment of what it means to be created in the image of God: unceasing righteous perfection.

As these are still residing in this fallen world, we may wonder: when does this start? When will we who are in Christ enjoy eternal life? In short, the answer is now and at the end of the age. Just as Adam and Eve died spiritually when they sinned and yet lived centuries physically, so our redemption is first spiritual and then physical. At the end of the age, all who are in Christ will have glorified, physical bodies to live in the new heavens and earth forever. But today, all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ are brought to life spiritually, instantaneously. Paul explains it this way:

you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:1, 4-7).

Eternal life begins when we are born again through faith in the Son of God, a spiritual reality forever.

Consider the immediate reality of this eternal life! How we live now has meaning and significance. As R.C. Sproul said rightly, “Right now counts forever.”³ And as Jesus is the Way, it is through him that we live this life. The way to eternal life and the way to live life are one in the same—through faith in the Son of God. This is why Paul could say, “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20), and that “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Rom. 1:17).

As Jesus is the Way, it is a way of love through faith to life. “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13), indeed: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

³ R.C. Sproul, “Right Now Counts Forever,” Ligonier Ministries, May 1, 2007, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/right-now-counts-forever/>.