

**<sup>14</sup>“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

**<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup>The one who believes in him is not condemned, but the one who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God. <sup>19</sup>This is the basis for the judgment: The light has come into the world, yet people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>In fact, everyone who practices wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, or else his deeds would be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But the one who does what is true comes toward the light, in order that his deeds may be seen as having been done in connection with God.” (EHV)**

Theme: God Loves the World

1. He doesn't condemn us
2. His gave his Son to save us

It's the most popular verse in all of Scripture. It's one the first verses young children memorize, it's a popular reference on posters at sporting events. Chances are, if someone only knows one passage of Scripture it's John 3:16. And there is good reason for that: it's a perfect summary of the gospel—it's been referred to as, “the gospel in a nutshell.”

The first thing that stands out as you think of John 3:16 is love—God loves the world! But our sinful nature quickly challenges that assertion, “does he really love the world? If God truly loves the world, why does he allow so much bad to happen to the world? He can do all things, can't he, then why doesn't he make this world perfect, a paradise to live in? Or, if God truly loves the world, and if he truly wants all people to be saved like he says he does, then why doesn't he simply save everyone and take them to heaven? How can a God who claims to be loving, condemn people to hell? Afterall, we aren't talking about a short temporary punishment, but a never-ending pain and torment with the devil where **the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched**. How can a loving God be so heartless and do such a thing as to condemn someone eternally?”

It's a common argument; you've probably had acquaintances say something like this to you at one point or another, perhaps you've even had similar thoughts yourself. The concept of hell does seem to be completely contrary to the idea of a loving God.

But in reality, this is the wrong way to look at things. It's coming at it from the wrong angle. God doesn't condemn anyone to hell. It's not as if we are morally neutral and then God decides where we go for eternity based on certain criteria.

Notice what Jesus says in verse 18, **the one who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God**. We stand condemned already by nature; in fact, the Greek doesn't just say that unbeliever is condemned already; but has been condemned already—in the past. As children of the devil, as enemies of God, we aren't born morally neutral. We inherited a sinful nature from our parents that put us into a state of sinfulness from birth. As Jesus said earlier in chapter three, **flesh gives birth to**

**flesh.** Sinful human beings give birth to sinful human beings; and therefore we are born as sinful and stand condemned already by nature.

This isn't God's fault; you can't blame him for this. He didn't create us this way—he created us in his own image and likeness: perfect and holy. But we sinned against him and passed on our sinfulness to our children, who also stand condemned.

Our wicked actions prove that we are sinful by nature. Our original sin, inherited from our parents, leads us to sin against God with our thoughts, words, and deeds. Jesus talks about that in verses 19 and 20, **people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. In fact, everyone who practices wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, or else his deeds would be exposed.**

By nature we don't want anything to do with God or his Son. The light of the world is Christ, but we hate Christ by nature; for the message of the cross is foolishness to unbelievers. Even now, as Christians, we have the tendency to gravitate to the darkness of this world. We have seen the light of Christ, but constantly we get sucked into the wicked and despicable ways of the sinful world around us. What we know is evil—what we know we shouldn't do, that is what we often find ourselves doing. Our sinful life proves the sinfulness into which we were born.

So we don't just deserve condemnation for what we do but also for who we are by nature. From the moment we are born, from the moment we were conceived we were morally corrupt, enemies of God, and stand condemned!

So it's not as if God condemns us as if he sends us to hell. We condemn ourselves without God having to do anything. The argument that God isn't a God of love because he condemns people to hell doesn't hold water because he doesn't condemn us, we brought this eternal destruction on ourselves. We were, so to speak, on a highway to hell from the time we were conceived and born. And that is where we'll all end up unless someone steps in and saves us.

God is a God of love because he saves us. He saw our wretched state, he saw that we were on our way to hell, to eternal condemnation; he realized that as sinners we are completely incapable for saving ourselves. So he did something about it. From the time Adam and Eve fell into sin, he has promised us a Savior. And over 2000 years ago he fulfilled that promise sending his Son into the world to save a world that can't stop sinning against him.

And so we see just how loving God is. The more we realize that we constantly sin against him and deserve nothing but his wrath and punishment, yet God sent his Son to save us—the more we understand the extent of God's love. The love of God is something the Bible emphasizes again and again. A few weeks ago we looked at Romans 5 where Paul writes, **God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** And John says something similar in 1 John 3, **This is how we have come to know love: Jesus laid down his life for us.** And then in chapter 4, **This is how God's love for us was revealed: God has sent his only-begotten Son into the world so that we may live through him. This is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.** God loves the world—that means that he loves you and me. It means that he paid for the sins of the entire world—yours and mine included!

The love of God is seen in the gift of his only begotten Son; and the love of God is seen in the willing sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The Father gave up his one and only Son to die, and not just to die, but to die for his enemies. And not just to die, but to suffer through hell. That is what God sent his Son to do, take our place and suffer through the eternal condemnation we deserve for our sin. For three hours on the cross, Jesus suffered through an eternity of hell for us.

But why did Jesus have to suffer through hell? Because God isn't just a loving God, but he is also a just God. And a just God demands punishment; someone or something had to be punished

for our sins. So Jesus was condemned in our place. He took our sins upon himself. He became guilty of what we had done wrong—all our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. And not just ours, but the sins of the whole world—of all people of all times: the unbelief, murder, genocide, rape, whatever horrible thing you can think of; it was all placed on Jesus' shoulders. And he suffered the just punishment for our sins. And Jesus willingly did it knowing what was going to happen! And he did all this not for his friends, but for his enemies. He did it then, out of nothing but love!

It's like the bronze snake, which is our first lesson and Jesus brings up in the opening verses of our text. The ungrateful Israelites complained about God. They claimed it would have been better to suffer as slaves in Egypt than to be out in the wilderness, where God led them after he miraculously saved them. Millions of people wandering the wilderness—what would they eat? God provided manna, a miraculous bread from heaven for them, six days a week. But the people called it a worthless food.

The people sinned against God, so he sent venomous snakes who bit them. They deserved it, of course; they brought it upon themselves. We all must agree that any punishment they received was just. But God, in love, decided to have mercy on his children. And had Moses put a bronze snake on a poll. And anyone who was bit, and looked at that bronze snake, would live.

This bronze snake is a type of Christ, that is, it points us to and reminds us of Jesus. Jesus himself tells us so in our gospel, **Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

The people weren't saved because of the bronze snake, but through faith in the promise that the Lord attached to the bronze snake, hung up on a poll. Jesus, however did accomplish our salvation and won our forgiveness when he hung on the cross. And through faith him, as the Lord promises, we will be saved, not from physical death but from the eternal condemnation that we deserve!

Faith receives the blessings that Christ won for us on the cross. Verse 16 says that those who believe in him shall not perish. This, of course, doesn't mean that we won't die—we will all die physically, that's part of the wages of sin. But rather it means that we won't die eternally, perish forever in the bowels of hell. Both verse 15 and 16 mention that we won't perish, verses 18 says, **The one who believes in him is not condemned.**

So that's one result of God's love for us—in what he takes away: our eternal condemnation. But there is another way, from a positive perspective, to look at the result of God's love for us. And that's in what he gives us: eternal life! Verses 15 and 16 again both say that through faith, we receive the gift of eternal life. So not only does the Lord save us from eternal condemnation, where we are all headed by nature, but he also gives us the gift of eternal life. In love he graciously promises that we'll bask in everlasting glory.

And this faith—it's given to us as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Just as God gave us his Son who died for us, so the Holy Spirit gave us faith through the gospel, to receive the benefits of Christ's death on the cross! Both are gifts, indicating God's grace, his undeserved love for us. Both are gifts not earned or deserved by us.

And notice that those who believe in Jesus as their one and only Savior, have eternal life. It's something we have right now, not something that we will possess in the future. Through faith in Christ, you currently have the sure and certain eternal life, something we'll fully realize when the Lord calls us home!

Despite what our sinful reason and logic tells us—and what the world tries to convince us of—yes, God is a God of love. The argument that God can't love us because people suffer forever in

hell, doesn't hold water. First off, God doesn't condemn us, we condemn ourselves. And secondly, even though he didn't have to, God saved us. Out of love for the whole world he sent his only Son to save the world and through faith we will not perish eternally, but we will receive the gift of eternal life. Amen.