

Freedom From Doubt

John 3:16

Intro

Hey Bethel, good to have the opportunity to open up God's Word with you this morning. I'd like to thank my esteemed colleague for his great work this morning. If you couldn't tell, Brad was in his sweet spot as apologetics is one of his primary passions and areas of expertise. Steve's not here this morning so I can say this, but I consider Brad to be the smartest guy on our staff. Really. I am really glad he is on our team. Now, I have never personally been nominated for that honor, but this morning I don't need to be because I am pretty much just going to talk about Jesus. And you don't have to be smart to talk about Jesus. You just have to focus on who He is and what He did and the rest just kind of takes care of itself. You know, that really is the story of Bethel Church. We don't have any rocket scientists here, or any that I know of. We aren't the smartest group of people in the world. But we are a bunch of people who lift up Jesus and try to make Him the center of all that we do, and then everything else tends to fall into place.

Now, I hope that you aren't tuning us out this morning because John 3:16 is so familiar to you. It has been said that familiarity breeds contempt. I beg you not to let that happen because friends, we are now about to talk about the most important truth in the entire world. I do not exaggerate when I say that the truth that John 3:16 brings out is an absolute matter of life and death. In fact, it is the only matter of life and death.

And you know what? Satan knows this, and so he works really hard to get us to doubt John 3:16. And this fact is compounded by the reality that doubting God is a fundamental human issue. This was the first place that Satan struck humanity, all the way back in the Garden of Eden. Do you remember the serpent's first words to Eve?

Did God actually say? (Genesis 3:1)

In other words, can God really be trusted? Does He really love you? Does He really have your best interest in mind? Can you really know that He really is going save you?

Friends, these are the same questions that the devil tempts us with today. And so I would now like to address two additional major areas of doubt – doubts about God's love and doubts about our salvation.

Doubts About God's Love

Let's begin with doubts about God's love, which come for a variety of reasons. Perhaps you have never experienced true love from another human being and therefore have a difficult time understanding what love truly is. Perhaps you have experienced great pain in your life and you can't fathom that a loving God would allow this to be your experience. Or perhaps there is something in your past or even in your present that makes you believe that God could never love you. Finally, you simply may not believe that you are in need of God's love.

You might be fine with the reality that He exists, but you doubt very much that it really matters at all.

What do we do with these doubts? How do we gain freedom from our past, our pain, our pride, and most of all, our age-old pain-in-the-neck enemy the snake? The answer for all of our doubts about God's love is here in John 3:16 -

"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 tells us that God loved the world – that's all of us – and that His love for us led Him to do something. This something is the greatest thing that has ever been done. He gave His Son.

I am continually amazed by how just one little word in the Bible can hold such massive amounts of truth. We see it here with several words in John 3:16. God. Loved. World. Gave. Only. Son. Believes. Perish. Eternal. Life. Those are all little words that represent incredibly massive truths. Massive. For the sake of our time, however, I want to look at just two of these words this morning. First *gave*, and then *believes*.

Let's begin with *gave*. What does it mean that God gave His Son? God's giving resulted in His one and only, perfect, holy, righteous, God-Himself-son being brutally murdered on an old roman cross for you and me. Brothers and sisters, if today you doubt that God loves you, you only have to look to the cross. There is simply no greater evidence than that.

Because this truth is so familiar to us, I think it might be helpful for us to look at an Old Testament story that shockingly and wonderfully pictures God's marvelous love-giving. It is quite a remarkable story and perhaps one that you are unfamiliar with.

A summary goes like this: As an illustration of His relationship with the people of Israel, God tells a prophet named Hosea to go and marry a whore by the name of Gomer. As the author of the story, Hosea himself uses the term whore, and as I believe this to be the most accurate picture of what God wants to get across here, that is the term I am going to use. If you have a problem with that, take it up with Hosea when you get to heaven.

Being obedient to God, Hosea marries Gomer and she conceives a son. God tells Hosea to name the son Jezreel, representing Israel's bloody and idolatrous past. Gomer then conceives again, this time a girl. Hosea isn't actually sure if the child is his, because when you are married to a whore you never know. But either way, God tells Hosea to name the daughter No Mercy. I'm not making this up, he named her No Mercy. That's not one that has ever been on the top 100 baby names list. How do you think the little girl did the first day of school? Hi, my name is No Mercy, what's yours? Anyway, the purpose of the name is to picture the fact that God is done with Israel and will no longer have mercy on them. Gomer then conceives a third and final time, and God tells Hosea to name the son Not My People, showing that Israel would not be considered God's people any longer.

Thankfully, that's not the end of the story, but it actually gets worse before it gets better. After the children are born, Gomer continues in her whoredom and she eventually leaves

Hosea, chasing after whatever man will have her. Her situation eventually becomes so desperate that she is forced to sell herself into slavery. And so in chapter 3 we find her on the auction block, ready to be sold to the highest bidder. And God comes to Hosea again and tells him, go buy her back. Go redeem her. Now I don't know about you, but if I'm Hosea, I am saying enough is enough. *I've got three kids, two of whom may not even be mine; she has slept with everyone in town; she has made a fool of me; and now she is selling herself to the highest bidder and you want me to take her back?* And God says, *Yes, and not only are you to buy her back, but you are going to love her! You are to love her as the Lord loves the children of Israel.* And so Hosea scrapes together all he can and goes and buys her back and takes her home.

Quite a story isn't it? Sounds like something you might see on the Lifetime Channel right? You may even think that I am making this up, but I promise you, it is right here. The real question for us is this: what does this story have to do with me?

Bethel, to apply this story to our lives we have to know who the characters represent. This is hard to swallow, so take a deep breath, and accept the reality that Hosea is meant to represent God, which means that Gomer is meant to represent us.

Our story isn't all that different from Gomer's. God created us for Himself and yet we ran after other gods. Despite His love and care we treated Him horribly and followed our sinful passions and desires. And because of our whoredom we were sold into slavery. We were on the auction block. We were in bondage to sin and the devil, with no way to free ourselves. And despite everything that we had done to God, He continued to pursue us and ultimately bought us back to be His.

But don't miss this....everything in the Old Testament, particularly the stories like this are all meant to point to Christ. When you read the Old Testament, don't forget that you always have to look for Christ. And where do we see Him in Hosea? We see Him as the price for our redemption, the payment for our freedom. What did God have to pay to get us back? It was Christ.

1 Peter 1:18-19 (NIV) tells us this:

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Friends, you can't look at Christ on the cross and doubt that God loves you. It is undeniable proof. He gave up his Son, his one, his only, his perfect son as the payment for you. What greater sign of love could there be than this? So Bethel, if you doubt God's love, just look to Jesus, and appreciate God's love in a greater way today.

Doubts About Salvation

Now, in the few minutes we have remaining I want to address perhaps the most common doubt that we face in the church today – doubt regarding our salvation. As a pastor here at

Bethel I can attest to the fact that this is an issue that affects many people. I can also affirm that at times this has been a tremendous struggle for me personally. Doubts about salvation are real, and they can be very heart wrenching and painful. And, as with Eve, the devil loves to make us doubt and question not only God's love but also our salvation. So, how do we find freedom from these doubts?

I believe the key issue on this matter from John 3:16 is *believe*. John uses this word 98 times in his gospel and even tells us that this is why he wrote the entire book:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

So, I believe that John would tell us that the key to overcoming doubt is to *believe*.

But what exactly does it mean to believe? As with other commonly used words, I am afraid we have lost the true meaning of the term *believe*. We say things like "I believe that it will rain today," or "I believe that I will have another piece of pizza," or "I believe that the Cubs will win the World Series...at least some day...maybe...nobody really believes that, do they?" I don't believe that any of our normal usages of believe are exactly what John means in his gospel. And so we need to look at this word with fresh eyes today.

The best explanation that I have found for what true belief consists of comes from the great Puritan pastor and theologian Jonathon Edwards. Edwards taught that true belief consists of two separate but equally important components, light and heat.

Let's first talk about **light**. In order to be saved, we have to have proper illumination. We must affirm the right things. John 3:16 tells us that these truths include the facts that:

- 1) God exists
- 2) Jesus is God's son
- 3) We are perishing because of our sin
- 4) Jesus' death and resurrection makes eternal life available to all of us.

This is the gospel, and to be saved we must assent to these truths. The problem is that way too many people stop there. They say, yes I "believe" all of these truths, when in reality that is only half of the picture.

Edwards taught that simply affirming these truths is not enough. If we truly believe them, they will result in **heat** – or better said, heat in the heart, which represents a changed life. The reason for this is because facts don't save us – Jesus does. You see, salvation is not simply about facts; it is about knowing and following Jesus Christ.

James 2:19 tells us that the demons believe in God – and yet we know that they aren't saved. Who is the best theologian on the planet? The devil. Does he believe in Jesus? Well, he certainly knows about him and can affirm all of these facts. But he isn't saved. Why? He

hasn't come to Christ and given Him his life. He hasn't surrendered. He isn't following Christ as His Lord and Savior.

So, if you want to know if you are saved today, you have to ask, *Have I surrendered my life to Christ? Do I not only affirm the truths about Him, but have I also received Him as my Lord and Savior? Have I realized that I am perishing and have I looked to Him to rescue me? Do I not only have light, but also heat?*

Verses 1-15 of John 3 are actually very helpful in understanding this. In these verses Jesus is telling a man named Nicodemus that in order to be saved he has to be born again. But Nicodemus just doesn't get it. He asks questions like, *Do I need to go back into my mother's womb?* This is not only impossible, but rather disturbing. And he doesn't get it because it's not something he can get on his own. And so in verses 14-15 Jesus changes tactics somewhat and shows Nicodemus what he needs to do – and that is to look to the cross. To illustrate this, he uses a story of the Israelites in the wilderness from Numbers 21.

Once again I will simply tell you the story. As they wandered in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, the Israelites began to complain against God. And eventually the Lord had enough of it and sent poisonous snakes into the camp and those who were bitten began to die. And so all of a sudden the people run to Moses and ask him to pray that God would forgive them and take away the snakes. And so God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and that whoever looked at the serpent would live.

Now, remember what we saw earlier with Hosea; everything in the Old Testament points to Christ. And so here in John 3 Jesus says, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so I have to be lifted up – and then look at the end of verse 15 - that whoever believes may have eternal life.

Let's draw the comparison – the Israelites that were bitten by the snake, how were they saved? First they had to believe the fact that looking at the snake could save them and then they actually had to look at the snake. It wouldn't have done them any good to say, "Yes, I believe the snake can save me," and then not look at the snake. They couldn't simply affirm the truth and walk away healed. That wouldn't have been belief. They were infected with the poison and the only way for them to be healed was to look at the snake. They had to believe that God would do what He said He would do and then show this belief by looking to Jesus.

Friends, the same is true for us. If we truly believe that Christ is our Savior it will result in looking to Him to save us. We have to believe the truth that we are infected with sin and we are perishing and that He is our only hope. And in doing so we have to place our faith in Him and look to the cross.

I don't know of a better way of explaining this than to tell you the conversion story of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Spurgeon was perhaps the greatest preacher since the Apostle Paul himself. He was a pastor in London during the latter part of the 19th century and was known as the Prince of Preachers. Listen carefully to the story of His salvation:

I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm, one Sunday morning, while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. . . . The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. . . . He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth [Isaiah 45:22]."

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus: "My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pain. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look.

"But then the text says, 'Look unto Me'. . . . Many of ye are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. Ye will never find any comfort in yourselves. Some look to God the father. No, look to him by-and-by. Jesus Christ says, 'Look unto Me.' Some of ye say, 'We must wait for the Spirit's workin'.' You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, 'Look unto Me.'"

Then the good man followed up his text in this way: "Look unto Me; I am sweatin' and great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so he was at the end of his tether. Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say, with so few present he knew me to be a stranger. Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart he said, "Young man, you look very miserable." Well, I did, but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance before. However, it was a good blow, struck right home. He continued, "and you always will be miserable—miserable in life, and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved."

Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a primitive Methodist could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live." I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said—I did not take much notice of it—I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" What a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could have almost looked my eyes away.

There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to him. . . . And now I can say—

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And Shall be till I die.

(C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Volume 1*, pp. 87-88)

Friends, how do you overcome doubts about your salvation? Simply ask, am I looking to Jesus? Not simply looked, but looked and still looking? If you are looking to Jesus, you can know for certain that you are saved. I can say that because Jesus said it later in John 6:37 - *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.* If you have come to Jesus, you are His and you always will be His.

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