

“God’s Greatest Gift” - Part 3

Text: John 3:14-18

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on December 15, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Christianity is news. The Bible calls it ‘gospel’ which means ‘good news.’ What I want you to see this morning is that there is a big difference between *good news* and *good advice*.
 - When someone gives advice they are telling you to *do something* in order to gain a better future. The assumption behind advice is that you can do it.
 - News however is very different. News is a report about something that has already happened. You cannot do anything about it. You can only respond or react in light of what has happened.
 - The distinction between good news and good advice is the dividing line between Christianity and all other world religions, spiritual paths, and ways of thinking. Christianity is about good news. Every other path is about good advice.
- Imagine an ancient city that is being threatened by the invading forces of an evil nation. That evil nation has crossed the border, burning and killing everything in its path. In response, the good king of the country leads his army out to fight before the enemy arrives at the capital city.
 - There are two potential scenarios here. First, if the king wins he will send messengers, ‘good newsmen’, to run back to the city with the news. They will announce it saying, **“Your king has won. It has all been done. The victory has been won on your behalf. Be joyful and live in light of this good news.”**
 - In the second scenario the king loses and has to retreat. In this case, he does not send messengers back to the city. Instead, he sends military advisors. They gather the people and say, **“Heed our advice. This is what you must do. Grab a sword and fight for your lives.”**
- Every other religion or system of thought sends military advisors. They say, **“If you want happiness, salvation, enlightenment, self-fulfillment, then this is what you must do. Here is Dr. Phil’s advice. Here are teachings of Buddha. Here are the seven keys to successful living. Heed the advice. You must do it. Fight for your life.”**
 - But Christianity sends messengers, good newsmen. In modern terms we send a newscaster to tell the evening news. And the newscaster says **“Something huge has been accomplished on your behalf. Now live in light of this good news.”**
- This advent season we are looking at the good news of what Christmas is all about. These past few weeks we have been seeing how God sent his Son into the world in order to die for our sins that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.
 - So in this morning’s news we are going to listen to Jesus act as a newscaster. He is going to tell us two stories. They are separated by thousands of years but they are related. These stories are of such tremendous importance for all the citizens of this earth that Jesus will then end by issuing an emergency alert.
 - In Canada we now receive an emergency alert if a major event happens. This is to warn us that an event has happened and is designed to keep us safe. So, Jesus will tell us two stories and then issues the emergency alert.
- The first story is a disturbing one about a perishing people. The second story is a shocking report about a rescuing God. Finally, Jesus will issue the emergency alert for the general public.

STORY #1: A PERISHING PEOPLE

- As is so often the case the first story in the news is not good news. It is a disturbing story. Jesus leads the broadcast with a story about **(SHOW SLIDE 2) a disturbing story about a perishing people.**
 - Let's pick it up in verse 14. **READ 14** - ¹⁴ *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* This is the first of three times in John's gospel that Jesus speaks of being lifted up. It is euphemism for his death by crucifixion. Notice though that Jesus says if you want to understand the news of his death then you have to understand an Old Testament story about Moses lifting up a snake in the desert.
 - Keep your finger in John 3 and turn back to Numbers 21.
- The incident we are going to look at takes place in the desert after God has graciously delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. You would think the people would be grateful but you would be wrong. **READ 4-5** - ⁴ *From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.* ⁵ *And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."*
 - So the people become impatient and they grumble. They grumble against Moses who is God's appointed leader. They grumble against God himself. They grumble against God's sovereign plan saying that if God were even half smart he would not have brought them out into the desert to die. They grumble against God's generosity. Even though God has given them water from the rock, manna from heaven, and quail meat they grumble against his generosity saying, **"We detest this miserable food."**
 - Are we so different? We do the same thing every time we sin. God, our good Creator, has given us life, placed us in a beautiful world, and lavished us with good gifts like laughter, family, and food. But rather than thanking Him and worshipping Him we grumble against our Creator when the slightest thing goes wrong.
- What is the result of this? Let's look at how God reacts to Israel's rebellion. **READ 6** - ⁶ *Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.* God punishes the people for their rebellion by sending venomous snakes among them. People get bit. People perish.
 - Jesus reports that all of humanity is in the same situation as Israel. In John 3:16 he says we are all perishing. Verse 16 makes this even clearer. The 'world' refers to humanity in rebellion against God. Jesus says rebellious humanity is perishing and will perish.
 - In verse 18 he states it again. **READ 18** - ¹⁸ *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already.* We all stand condemned. And look at verse 36. **READ 36** - ³⁶ *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*
- Do you see how disturbing this is? Jesus, reports that as a result of rejecting our Creator we are perishing, condemned, and under the wrath of God. Like Israel we will die for as the Bible says, **"The soul that sins will die."** But it is not just physical death. The Bible speaks of a second death.
 - According to Jesus, to 'perish' means that when you die you will be eternally rejected by God in a place that Jesus called 'hell.'

IT IS LOVING TO WARN SOMEONE OF IMMINENT DANGER

- Jesus news report is extremely offensive to West Coast people. Most people will say, **“This is not a God of love. How can you possibly say it is loving to talk about hell?”** First, notice that it is Jesus, the most loving man who ever lived, who is broadcasting this disturbing story. Second, I want you to see that it is because Jesus loves you that he gives this warning. If you see a person in imminent danger it would be unloving and just plain cruel not to warn them.
 - This is why our government has established the alert system on our phones. Of course, it’s not a fun topic. But it is a loving act to be warned if there is a tsunami, a terrorist attack, a forest fire or something else.
 - The whole point of an alert system is to say, **“This event has happened. This is what all citizens must do to be safe.”** Jesus is saying, **“We have all sinned. We are all perishing. Yes, it’s not a fun subject, but our Creator loves us enough to tell us the facts.”**
- Israel got the message loud and clear. Look back at Numbers 21:7. **READ 7 - ⁷And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.**
 - Notice two things: first, they confessed their sin. They did not say, **“I just don’t believe I am under God’s wrath.”** Notice secondly that they knew there was nothing they could do to rescue themselves from God’s punishment.
 - We must do the same. First, we must come before our Creator and say, **“I have sinned against you.”** Second, we must reject any idea that we can rescue ourselves. Every other religion or spiritual path gives advice so that you can save yourself: **“help others more, do more rituals, pray over and over again, read your holy book, and go to worship.”** In other words, **“increase your performance and you will rescue yourself.”**
 - That is like telling Jim the Israelite who just got bit by a venomous snake, **“You can escape death if you just be a nicer person.”** The venom is coursing through his body. No advice will do. Something outside Jim must rescue him or he will perish.
- Jesus’ first story is so disturbing because not only are we perishing, but we cannot do anything to help ourselves. Our only hope is to be like Israel: to give up trying to help ourselves, to cast ourselves on God, and cry out to him, **“Is there any way you can remove the punishment that we deserve?”**
 - Jesus’ first story is a disturbing story about a perishing people.

STORY #2: A RESCUING GOD

- But there is no time for a commercial break because Jesus wants to quickly get to the second story. The second story changes everything because it is good news. In fact, this is the best news ever broadcasted in the history of the world. Jesus’ second story is **(SHOW SLIDE 3) a shocking story about a rescuing God.**
 - Again, Jesus says we have to go back to Numbers 21 for he says the only way we will understand the news of what he did on the cross is to understand what happened there. Turn there with me. **READ 8-9 - ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.**
 - Do you see it? Although God would have been just to let them all perish, God does not let them perish. He loves them. He provides a way to escape the punishment that is due to them.

- Now come back to John. Verse 16 contains the most shocking news you have ever heard. **READ 16** - 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.** What? Are you serious? God, our Creator, the one who has been spurned, the one who should let us perish, has loved us? Yes!
 - I read a review in the paper for a movie called *The Legion* – a movie I don’t recommend or plan on seeing. Paul Bettany plays Michael the Archangel who has been sent to earth by God to speed up the apocalypse.
 - But Michael does not want to do it because, unlike God, he loves humanity. In a touching speech he says of God, **“He lost faith. I didn’t.”** It would make perfect sense for God to give up on us but this is the shocking message of the Bible: God has loved this rebellious planet.
- Now here is the big question of the day: how has God loved us? He did not just have good feelings toward us. No, God’s love acted. God did something that demonstrates his love to us. What does verse 16 say? **READ 16a** - **For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.**
 - This tells us something very important about Jesus’ death. On the one hand, we must never think of Jesus as an unwillingly victim. No! Jesus willingly, deliberately, and voluntarily gave up his life. But on the other hands this passage teaches us to avoid an equal but opposite error. You must never think that Jesus is the loving Saviour who rescues us from the wrath of a cruel and mean God. No! You must never set the Father against the Son.
 - Who is it who loved this world? God the Father. Out of love, God planned the rescue mission. Out of love, God sent Jesus to die. He gave His Son. Isn’t this what verse 17 says also? **READ 17** - ¹⁷ **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.**
 - C.J. Mahaney puts it like perfectly: **(SHOW SLIDE 4) “The glory of the gospel is this: the one from who we need to be saved is the one who has saved us.”**¹ God is the Judge but God is also the Saviour. God gave His Son.
- Jesus is reporting that He will be lifted up. He will sacrifice himself so that we will not perish.

STANDING ON HIS SHOULDERS

- My favourite story of sacrificial rescuing love comes from Dr. Bryan Chapell. It happened in his hometown when two brothers decided to play in the sand banks by the river. Because the town depends on the river for commerce, dredges regularly clear its channels of sand and dump the sand in great mounds along the river’s edge. Nothing is more fun for children than playing in these mountainous sand piles – and few things are more dangerous.
 - You see the dredges dump the sand in piles on the shore while it is still wet. As a result, the outside of the pile dries providing a rigid crust but inside large empty voids form as the water runs out of the pile. If a child climbs on a mound of sand that has such a hidden void, the crust will easily collapse into the void. Then of course the sand from higher up on the mound will rush in to fill the void, trapping the child.
- This is exactly what happened to the two brothers as they raced up one of the larger mounds. When the boys did not return home at dinnertime, family and neighbors organized a search. When they found the younger brother only his head and shoulders protruded from the mound. He was unconscious from the pressure of sand on his body.

¹ C.J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*, pg 70.

- The searchers began digging frantically. When they had cleared the sand to his waist, he began to regain consciousness. **“Where is your brother?”** the rescuers shouted. **“I’m standing on his shoulders,”** replied the child.
 - With the sacrifice of his own life the older brother had lifted the younger to safety.
- Oh friends this is the meaning of the gospel. This is the love of God. As rebels, we were perishing under the sand of God’s judgment. God would have been perfectly just to let us perish. But out of love for us, God sent Jesus to rescue us.
 - Jesus, our true elder brother, took on human flesh. He came down into the sand with us. Jesus our true elder brother went to the cross and there he placed us on his shoulders as the sand of the punishment that was due to us came down all around Him taking his life.
 - Oh what sacrificial love that God would give His Son to perish that undeserving sinners like you and I might be rescued and not perish. This is shocking news. This is the good news of Christmas.

AN EMERGENCY ALERT

- The news gets even better. Jesus concludes his prime-time broadcast with a public service announcement. In light of these two stories he gives a **(SHOW SLIDE 5) an emergency alert to all citizens.**
 - The alert is very simple: if you want to be rescued from perishing all you have to do is look away from yourself and look to Jesus. Isn’t this the main point of what Jesus is getting at when he says in verse 14?
 - **READ 14-15** - ¹⁴*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵*that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*
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.*

The Israelites stood under the sentence of death but anyone who looked at the snake, trusting in God’s provision, was granted life. Similarly, according to Jesus all humanity is liable to perish but anyone who looks to him and believes in him will be granted life. Isn’t that what verse 16 says as well? **READ 16b, 18a - , that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. . . . Whoever believes in him is not condemned.**

- The emphasis here is on how Israel and how we respond to the news of what God has done. To be granted life we must look to Jesus. The word translated ‘look’ in Numbers 21 means to see with belief or understanding. If they refused to look to God’s provision they would perish.
 - This is such good news because all it requires is looking. That’s it. They don’t have to be able to climb the pole and touch it. They don’t have to run around the pole 2300 times. They don’t have to place all their money at the bottom of the pole. Can you imagine a more dramatic way for God to emphasize the fact that they could contribute nothing to their deliverance? So it is with us.
- Charles Spurgeon is one of the most gifted preachers in the history of the church. He tells his conversion story in these words: **“I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair now, had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm one Sunday morning, when I was going to a place of worship. When I could go no farther, I turned down a court and come to a little Primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel there might have been a dozen or fifteen people. The minister did not come that morning; snowed up, I suppose. A poor man, a shoemaker, a tailor, something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach.**

- *Now it is right that ministers should be instructed, but this man was really stupid, as you would say. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had nothing else to say. The text was 'Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.' He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter.*
- *There was I thought, a gleam of hope for me in the text. He began this way: 'My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says 'Look.' Now that does not take a great deal of effort. It ain't lifting your feet or your finger, it is just 'look.' Well, a man need not go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool and yet you can look. A man need not be [rich] to look. Anyone can look; a child can look. But this is what the text says.*
 - *Then it says 'Look unto Me.' 'Ay...many of ye are looking to yourselves. No use looking there. You'll never find comfort in yourselves...*
- *Then the good man followed up his text in this way: 'Look unto Me; I am sweating great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hanging on the cross. Look! I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend and sit at the Father's right hand O! look to Me!'*
 - *When he had got 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, He then said, 'Young man, you look very miserable.'*
 - *Well I did, but I have not been accustomed to having remarks made on my personal appearance from the pulpit before. However, it was a good blow struck. He continued: 'And you will always be miserable in life, and miserable in death if you do not obey my text. But if you obey now, this moment you will be saved.'*
- *Then he shouted as only a Primitive Methodist can: 'Young man, look to Jesus Christ!' I did 'look.' There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun: I could have risen that moment and sung with enthusiasm of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me that before."²*

CONCLUSION

- This ends this morning's broadcast. The news has been given. The alert has been issued.
 - The only question now is, "**how will you respond to this alert?**"
 - Look to what Jesus has done. Look to the Saviour.

² http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Great%20Men%20of%20God/charles_spurgeon.htm