

INTRODUCTION

John 3:16 has been called the Gospel in a nutshell. God loves you so much that He sent His Son so you can have eternal life when you believe.

Forty years ago, I was involved with a family in Alabama that became deeply divided. The dad was a retired military man, a hard-nosed, tough-as-nails guy. He was a deacon in the church I served. He had three children all in college at the same time. They were active members of our student ministry. The younger daughter met a young man her parents didn't approve of, and they ran off and got married. The dad was so angry that he disowned his daughter. He would tell people he only had two children. I can remember trying to intercede for her, but he was too stubborn and angry to budge. Even though he claimed to be a Christian he said, “I will never forgive her.”

The daughter would call her home, but her father refused to talk to her. She would write letters to her dad, but he would throw them away without answering them.

Once she even wrote a letter to me to ask me to read it to her dad. She said, “Dad, I love you. Please forgive me. Please accept my love.” But even that didn't move him. Even after I moved to Texas, I stayed in touch with the daughter who had been alienated by her dad.

She and her husband moved to another state and had a daughter. Her parents had never even seen the little girl. One day when the girl was five, the daughter drove the two of them to her father's house in Alabama. She parked out front and told her daughter, “I want you to go to the front door and when your granddaddy answers the door, I want you to hug him and tell him that you are his granddaughter and that you love him.” The grandmother opened the door and the little girl said, “Grandmother! It's so great to meet you. I want to see my granddaddy.” The grandmother took her in her arms and hugged her. Then she took the little girl to that hardnosed, stubborn old coot. The little girl flew into his arms and said, “Granddaddy, I am so happy to meet you!” He took his granddaughter in his arms for the first time, and that's when his hard heart was melted. He broke down and wept and he hugged his granddaughter for the first time. And that same day he was reconciled to his long-lost daughter.

You see, she had sent letters and made phone calls to say, “I love you.” But it wasn't until she sent her child that the hard heart of her dad was broken. I was overjoyed to hear that they were reconciled.

And when I think of that I think about how God sent prophets, and gave us His word, but then to show us how much He really loves us, He sent us His only child to tell us that sinners can be reconciled to a Holy God.

John 3:16-18. “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Anyone who believes in him is not condemned, but anyone who does not believe is

already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God.”

So in this passage we learn there is good news and there is bad news.

Zig Ziglar was one of my favorite motivational speakers. He was a committed Christian, and spoke here in our church. He had this to say about the good news and the bad news: “The GOOD NEWS is there is nothing we can do that is BAD enough to keep us out of Heaven; the BAD NEWS is there is nothing we can do GOOD enough to get us into Heaven.”

With that introduction, let me share with you the bad news and the good news according to God’s Word. I will state these propositions in the first person, so I’d like for you to repeat them after me.

Here’s the bad news:

1. MY SIN HAS SEPARATED ME FROM GOD.

God is holy and we are sinful, and a holy God cannot tolerate sin. The Bible says, “But your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not listen.” (Isaiah 59:2 CSB)

Now our separation from God isn’t a physical separation, because God is everywhere. You can’t escape His presence. But spiritually speaking, sin separates us relationally from God.

In the last message, I talked about how Adam and Eve had a perfect, loving relationship with their Creator. But when they chose to sin, that beautiful relationship was broken. Their decision had a massive ripple effect that has touched every generation until today.

Each of us enter life with a broken relationship with our Creator. And our tendency is to deny that we are sinners. We think everyone else is, but we think we are pretty good. When we sing Amazing Grace, a lot of us are thinking, “Amazing Grace. How sweet the sound. That saved a wretch like him or her!”

We’ve been reading through Jeremiah as we move through the Bible together. In Jeremiah 17:9 the Bible says, “The heart is deceitful above all things; desperately wicked. Who can know it?” I’ve said before that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

Here’s the next profession of the bad news:

2. IF I DIE IN MY SIN, I AM CONDEMNED TO HELL.

Jesus was talking to some self-righteous Pharisees one day and He said, “Therefore I told you that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins.” (John 8:24 CSB)

John 3:19 doesn't say that those who don't believe WILL be condemned. It says they are condemned already. If you die without trusting Jesus, you will die in your sin and you will be condemned to hell. In our modern, consumer-oriented churches, you don't hear many preachers talk about hell because it is such an unpleasant topic. But it is part of the bad news.

Think about John 3:16. There is one scary word in this verse. If John 3:16 is a beautiful bouquet of flowers, this one word is like a sprig of poison ivy in the bouquet. The word “perish” reminds us there is a place in creation called hell. It's like the garbage dump of creation. It's like the death row prison of the universe. Jesus said in Matthew 25:41 that hell was created for the devil and his angels. It was never designed for human habitation. But then sin came into the world, and every sinner was left holding a boarding pass to hell.

There are many descriptions of hell in the New Testament, but basically hell can be described in three ways. First, it is a place of torment. In Luke 16:24, the rich man said, “Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and touch my tongue for I am tormented in this flame.”

Second, hell is a place of darkness. In Matthew 25:30 Jesus said hell is a place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Third, hell is a place of eternal separation from God. In 2 Thessalonians 1:9 the Bible says those in hell are cut off from the presence and glory of the Lord. So hell is torment, darkness, and separation.

Dr. John Phillips is a respected British New Testament scholar. Let me quote how he describes hell. He writes, “We have all seen people destroy their bodies with drink and drugs and with promiscuous sex with its dread harvest of disease. But God threatens to allow sin to complete its work beyond the grave by destroying the soul. The soul doesn't perish like the body. The soul is immortal. Sinners take with them into eternity unquenchable thirst, terrible passions and appetites, mad cravings and inflamed desires, fierce longings and furious hate, lusts and loathing, white-hot temper and spine-chilling fear. Those destructive character traits will continue to ravage the soul and will never be either satisfied or stilled. The word perish denotes the final condition of the soul that rejects God's love.” (*Exploring John*, p. 75)

I remember Adrian Rogers saying there are only two places in the universe where there is no hope. One is hell, because when you go to hell you've lost hope. The other is heaven, because when you are in heaven, you don't need hope anymore.

So that's the bad news. It's pretty bad. I've discovered through my life that there are some preachers who only focus on the bad news. In fact, they are called hell-fire-and-brimstone preachers. They walk up and own people's souls with hobnailed boots of condemnation. And some people actually feed on that. Some misguided people don't think they've really been to church unless they feel bad when they leave. I know, because early on I was one of those hell-fire-and-brimstone preachers. As people left church, they said, “Preacher, you really stepped on our toes today, thank you.” Or “you really preached the gospel today!” I actually hadn't preached much of the gospel, I had just yelled and screamed a lot about the wages of sin. As I

grew older and wiser, I came to understand that the word gospel means “good news.” And so I started preaching the good news more than the bad news. But I don’t ignore the bad news. And you can also find preachers who err on the other side. They only talk about the good news, and never mention the bad news. They would never even mention hell in a message because they don’t want to risk offending anyone.

The bad news is bad. It’s really bad. But that’s what makes the good news so good. For instance, if someone says to you, “You don’t have cancer,” that would be a random statement. But if you introduce it with the bad news, it makes sense. The doctor says, “We found a suspicious spot on your lung, and we did a biopsy. And you don’t have cancer.” That makes sense, and you would say, “Thank you Lord!” The good news is not good unless you understand the severity of the bad news.

Here’s the GOOD news!

1. GOD DOESN’T CONDEMN ME FOR MY SIN; HE WANTS TO FORGIVE ME.

God didn’t send Jesus into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. The Bible says in Romans 8: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.” (Romans 8:1-2 CSB)

Watching the flood of Hurricane Florence this week reminded me of when I preached at the Chapel Service at New Orleans Baptist Seminary a few years after Hurricane Katrina. Even four or five years later there were dozens of homes around the seminary that had been damaged by the flooding. They were abandoned and almost falling down. Every damaged house had a big sign on it with one word. It said, “Condemned.” That meant there was no hope for the restoration of that house, it was to be destroyed.

We are all born with a condemned sign on our devastated life. When we trust Him, God removes that sign and rebuilds us into a more beautiful dwelling than before. We become a new creation!

The Bible says, “God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV) “The wages of sin IS death; but the GIFT of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23 CSB)

Jesus came to show us what God is like. In John 8 the Pharisees who opposed Jesus brought a woman who had been caught in adultery. They used her as a moral volleyball and spiked her at His feet. They said, “Moses’ law says this woman should be stoned. So, what do you say?” They must have laughed with glee because they thought they had Jesus trapped. If He said, “Don’t stone her,” they could respond by saying, “You can’t be the Messiah because you deny God’s law.” If Jesus said, “Stone her,” the people would have accused Him of having no mercy. Everyone realized this was a trap, where was the man involved? The Bible says he should be stoned as well.

So Jesus didn't answer them. He just stooped down and wrote in the sand. It's the only occurrence of Jesus writing anything. But we don't know what He wrote. Maybe he wrote the names of the men in front of each man. That would have blown their minds. Maybe he wrote a commandment that each man had broken. Or maybe He wrote the name of a certain woman in front of each man—that would have really blown their minds. Then He stood up and said, "Okay, the one without sin can throw the first stone."

I love this part. He stooped back down and started writing again. He wasn't even looking at the men. But one by one they dropped their rocks and disappeared into the crowd. Finally Jesus looked up at the woman. And asked, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No, Lord." And then Jesus showed us what God is like. He said, "I don't condemn you either. Go, and from now on don't sin anymore." He didn't condone her sin, but He didn't condemn her.

As Christians, we sometimes take devious pleasure in condemning the behavior of those who are living in sin. Let's be like Jesus. We don't condone their sin, but neither do we condemn them. We point them to a God of mercy who wants to forgive them.

Here's some more good news.

2. ON THE CROSS, JESUS EXPERIENCED HELL FOR ME.

Jesus isn't our example. He is our substitute. We can't imitate Him, we can only trust Him. Here's what happened when Jesus was on the cross. "From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over the whole land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'" (Matthew 27:45-46 CSB)

Some Christians claim that Jesus descended into hell, but the New Testament never teaches that. But Jesus DID experience hell during the six hours He was hanging on the cross.

Hell is a place of torment. Hell is a place of darkness. Hell is a place of separation from God, and that what happened to Jesus on the cross. He suffered more physical agony than we can ever imagine. We often talk about someone experiencing excruciating pain. That English word "excruciating" comes from the Latin word meaning "cross." He experienced the torment of hell so that we wouldn't have to.

The Bible says at noon, darkness covered the land. This wasn't an eclipse or a thunderstorm. It was a supernatural darkness that lasted for three hours. In the moment that He became sin for us, God turned away. God is light, and when God turns away, the light flees, and there is only darkness. Jesus experienced the darkness of hell so we wouldn't have to.

And then something happened that had never happened before or since in the history of all time. Jesus who was co-equal and co-eternal with the Father, experienced a relational separation from God. Jesus always called God, Abba, or daddy. But here He cries out in the

impersonal agony of the forsaken, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Just before He died, Jesus said, “Father into your Hands I commit my Spirit.” This is a mystery, but since Jesus is infinite, He experienced separation from God for a finite time, so that those of us who are finite won’t have to suffer separation from God for an infinite time.

Jesus took the punishment we deserve. Here’s a simple way to visualize it: Let this hand represent me and you. And let this other hand represent Jesus. This book represents all my sin, and all your sin. It’s quite a load. This book has over 783,000 words in it. My sins equal more than that. My sin book is thicker than this.

And here’s Jesus, what’s the difference? Look at all the sin in our life. The difference is that Jesus is totally sinless. There’s no sin in Him. When Jesus died on the cross, the Bible describes what happened: God took all of our sin and He transferred it to Jesus. He put our sins on Jesus. In Isaiah 53:6 NKJV we read, “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

Here’s even more good news!

3. WHEN I TRUST JESUS, HE GIVES ME REAL LIFE!

Jesus came so that we could experience real life, the fullest. He said, “A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.” (John 10:10 CSB)

Eternal life doesn’t begin when you die. It begins when you trust in Jesus. Heaven will be wonderful, but the Christian life isn’t just pie in the sky by and by. It’s also steak on your plate while you wait. But did you notice the verb is in the present tense? It doesn’t say you WILL have or MAY have or you MIGHT have eternal life. It says if you believe you will not perish but HAVE—right now—eternal life. But eternal life isn’t just existing forever. It’s a quality of life you can have now. You can have real life right now.

To believe in Jesus doesn’t mean to believe facts about Jesus. You can believe that Jesus was born of a virgin in Bethlehem. You can believe He lived a sinless life; died on the cross for sins and was raised from the dead. You can believe all those facts, and not have eternal life. The word believe means to trust. You can believe that George Washington was our first President but you can’t trust Him.

The word believe appears 98 times in John’s account. It’s always a verb. The word faith, which is a noun, appears zero times in John’s story. Faith is static, but trust is active.

Let’s imagine you are planning a trip to Europe and you’ve never flown before. You can have faith in the laws of aerodynamics, and you can have faith in the skill of an airline pilot, and you can have faith in the construction of a jet. You can even buy a ticket and go to the airport. But you don’t actually TRUST any of those factors until you actually board and aircraft and buckle in. Then the pilot taxis out and lines up and advances the throttles. That jet roars down the

runway and reaches takeoff speed, and soars into the air. That’s when your faith in the laws of aerodynamics, faith in the skill of the pilot, and faith in the aircraft become real. You are trusting all those.

You can memorize the Bible, but you will take off for eternal life until you personally trust Jesus to forgive your sins and to give you eternal life. Have you trusted Jesus for eternal life? Are you experiencing real life right now, or is there something missing?

CONCLUSION

There are three hundred different philosophical “isms” in the English language. And John 3:16 refutes many of the faulty isms. For instance, it refutes Atheism, which says there is no God because this verse says, “For God.” Deism is the belief that if there is a God, He isn’t involved with His creation. But John 3:16 tells us there is a God who loves us. Racism says some races are better and more highly favored, but this verse says that God loved the world. Materialism says life is all about getting, more and more and more. But this verse says God so loved that He gave. Legalism says you go to heaven by being good and doing good, but this verse says you go to heaven by trusting in God’s one and only Son. Salvation isn’t a reward for the righteous; it’s a gift to the guilty. Fatalism says that everything is fixed and we have no control over our destiny. But this verse says, “Whoever believes in Him.” Universalism says ultimately everyone will go to heaven, and this verse emphasizes that only those that believe go to heaven. Pluralism says all religions are the same and there are many paths to God, but this verse says that there is only one way—Jesus. Pessimism says life is hopeless for everyone but this verse says you don’t have to perish. Humanism says there is no God and this life is all there is, but John 3:16 promises that we can have eternal life.

Vance Havner used to say that all of the “isms” in the world will one day become “wasims.” And thank God, because of John 3:16, we’re not saved by an “ism,” we’re saved by trusting Jesus. How do I know that? The Bible tells me so. Let me paraphrase it: You Creator God loves you so much that He sent His one and only Son, so that if you will trust Him, you won’t go to hell, but you will experience RIGHT NOW eternal life.”

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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