

## THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

---

### Small Group Discussion Guide

**Text: John 3:16-18** - [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. [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. [18] 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. (ESV)

**Theme/ Big Idea: John 3:16-21** is a continuation of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in **John 3:1-15**. Transitioning immediately from the story of Israelites perishing in the desert we are told Jesus was sent that we might not perish. Therefore, our only hope is to follow the example of Israel in the wilderness and look to the salvation God provides.

**Context/ Background Information: John 3:16-21** is a continuation from the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in **John 3:1-15**. As we transition into **verses 16-18** Nicodemus fades into the background. Though he fades we cannot lose sight of the context. Nicodemus is told he must be born again, that it is the mysterious work of the Spirit, and it is by looking to and "believing" on the Son of Man lifted up on our behalf.

In **verses 14 and 15** Jesus said, just "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." In the context of **Numbers 21** the people of Israel were bitten, perishing, and in desperate need of rescue. Similarly, according to **John 3:1-21** all of humanity has been bitten by sin, is dying, and in desperate need of new spiritual life. Just as the people of Israel must look to the lifted up serpent to be spared, so too must we look to the lifted up Son if we are to be spared. Indeed, this is the very purpose for which Jesus was sent (**vs 16-17**).

Every person stands "condemned already" (**vs 18**). We are all "perishing" from the venom and curse of sin (**vs 16**). **John 3:36** says that the "wrath of God remains on [us]." **Verse 16** clearly indicates that not looking to the Son of God lifted up on our behalf will lead to death (lit. perishing). However, God has provided a means of rescue and escape just he did for Israel in the wilderness. God "gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life...that the world might be saved through him" (**vs 16b & 17b**).

Therefore, our only hope is to follow the example of Israel in the wilderness and look to the salvation God provides. In our case we must look to the Son of Man "lifted up:" the "only Son" given on our behalf (**vs 15 and 16**). We must believe in who Jesus is, (specifically, our redeemer and savior), and believe on what Jesus does on our behalf (specifically, Jesus dies as our substitutionary sacrifice for sins, is our only means of being reconciled to God, and is our only hope for life). We are told three times we must "believe in him" (**vs 15, 16, and 18**). To believe in this context means to have complete confidence in something so much so that you would entrust your soul to that thing. To not believe does not mean we have no faith, it means our faith, trust, and confidence is placed in something other than Jesus. According to **verse 18**, the resulting consequence of not believing on Jesus is to remain condemned. **John 3:36** says that the wrath of God remains on us. And by implication, **verse 16** says, we will perish.

Why did God do this? Why did he send his Son, give his Son, and offer his Son to be lifted up on our behalf? We are told that it was because of God's great love. Another way of understanding **verse 16** is, "God loved the world in this way...he gave his only Son." The giving and sacrificing of his only son communicates "the greatness of the gift" but also demonstrates the depth, richness, and greatness of God's love. The sacrificial giving of the Son is not based on the loveliness of the world. It is based on the fact that God is love (**1 John 4:16**). To be clear, the "world" in John is always referring to the inhabited world and in this context it is referring to the rebellious world. Again, with the context of **Numbers 21:4-9** in mind, God provided a means of rescue and escape for the people of Israel despite their grumbling, complaining, questioning, and rebellion. This was not done because of their loveliness but because of his steadfast love. The same is true in **John 3:16**. From **Genesis 3:15** onward, throughout the entire meta narrative of the Bible, God promised to rescue mankind who was bitten by the curse of sin. He promised rescue and victory through one who would be bruised. In **John 3:14-18** we see the fulfillment of that promise and the means of fulfillment. It will be through the sacrifice of the only son of God and his being lifting up on the cross.

One last interesting point worth noting is that the phrases "world" and "whoever believes" broadens the scope of God's love from simply the Israelites or Pharisees to all who would believe. Nicodemus and the Pharisees expected to see the kingdom of God by virtue of their ethnic identity and religious performance. But they never expected for anyone outside the Israelites to be invited in. Here we see yet another reference to the love of God in salvation being extended beyond the borders of Israel.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. In what way did God demonstrate his love for rebellious sinners according to John 3:16? What does it say about the depth and breadth of sin in our lives that someone had to die? What does it say about the depth and breadth of God's love that he was willing to sacrifice his only Son and that Jesus was willing to die on our behalf?
2. What do verses 16-18 say about the status of the world that Jesus enters? Does Jesus enter into a neutral world, a world favorable disposed to Jesus (John 1:10-11), or a world that is perishing and stands condemned already? How does John 3:36 further echo this point?
3. So if we stand condemned already (3:18) and the wrath of God is upon us (3:36) what is our only hope and means of being reconciled to a holy God? What do verses 15, 16b, 18a say we must do? How does "believe" in 15, 16b, 18a similar to "look" in Number 21:4-9?
4. To believe in this context means to have complete confidence in something so much so that you would entrust your soul to that thing. To not believe does not mean we have no faith, it means our faith, trust, and confidence is placed in something other than Jesus. According to verse 18, what is the result of not believing on Jesus? What result is implied in verse 16b? What is true of every person who believes on Jesus according to Romans 8:1?
5. What reasons do you have to be confident of God's love towards you according to these verses?

#### Footnotes:

1. D. A. Carson, [The Gospel According to John](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 204.