

What Will We Reap?

John 3: 1-21

Studying the Bible may seem to be an overwhelming task, especially to those who are unfamiliar with it. It is not a book, but a collection of 66 books, woven together by a common thread, the love of God. If you are like the many who are not sure where to begin, the Gospel of John is a great place to start. It is often referred to as the gospel of belief and was written by the Apostle John, one of Jesus's dearest and closest followers. With the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John's two-fold reason for writing is found near the end of his letter in chapter 20: 30-31: "these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." We can almost hear echoes of the words of apostle Paul written to the church at Rome. Romans 10:17 Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Hearing the words of Jesus, studying the words of Jesus and then applying the words of Jesus brings life-saving faith in Jesus.

Unless we suffer from loss of sight or sound, reading and hearing the words of Scripture is the easy part. Today we can choose from dozens of translations and versions, including many written for those with nothing more than an elementary school education, that will allow us to see and hear God's word in a relevant and meaningful way. **The challenge is not seeing or hearing, but studying, interpreting and applying the words to our own lives.** Even so, by grace God has given us all that we need to come to saving faith in His Son Jesus.

John 3:16 is perhaps the most well-known verse in the entire Bible. Whether it was in Sunday School or the sports stadium, millions of people have seen it, heard it and memorized it, including your pastor. I first saw it on a poster while watching a Steelers game on television as a young adult. As a result, I purchased a Bible and looked it up. I didn't know then what it meant, but I did know God was asking me to find out. Forty years later, I still am learning how much it truly means.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. At first glance, it seems to be a mystery.

Why would the God of the universe, the God so powerful that He spoke creation into existence, the God that created the detailed and intricate workings of the human body and breathed it into life; why would that God willingly give up a part of Himself, the best part, the part that was most dear and precious, so that lost people, people who once loved darkness, people like you and I, be reconciled to Him?

Like the Lords Table, it is a holy mystery. The difference is that this is a holy mystery our human minds can at least partially solve. God has given us holy clues to help us do that, and the Scriptures are filled with them. When we study a passage of Scripture to discern its meaning and applications for our life it is helpful is to look for words or phrases that are repeated and underline or highlight them. The word “believe” or some form of it is found nearly 100 times in the 21 chapters that make up John’s gospel. Belief in Jesus is clearly something the writer does not want us to overlook. Belief is not the only word we find repeated. John also carefully records for us two powerful words containing only 3 letters- 2 vowels and a consonant- that Jesus used to refer to Himself on at least twenty-three different occasions. They are the words “I am”. “I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the door of the sheep, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth and the life, and I am the true vine.

Jesus choice of those words “I Am” was intentional. His audience, very familiar with the powerful words God spoke to Moses in the OT: “I am who I am”, would have immediately recognized that Jesus was claiming to be the God of creation, the God of the Scriptures, the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Moses and Elijah, the True God, the Provider, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the One who guides, the One who restores, and the One who holds the keys of heaven and hell. It was His “I Am” claims that eventually led to His crucifixion and death on the cross. We learn through holy repetition.

Another clue to look for when studying a passage of Scripture are words or phrases that seem to contrast with each other. There are several contrasts in John’s Gospel. Light and darkness, life and death, truth and deceit, flesh and spirit, belief and unbelief. They are there to have us recognize that there are absolutes in life, to challenge us in our misconceptions about God, and to challenge us to believe in Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures are full of powerful words that can help us in our day to day lives to discern the things are true and faithful and the things that are not. The Bible illuminates the things that bring light and joy into the world while casting a shadow over the things that bring darkness and despair. For instance, servanthood and generosity bring light and joy into the world, while greed and selfishness bring darkness and despair.

Yet when we encounter those troublesome passages that cause us to reflect upon our own tendency to be greedy or selfish or challenge us to rethink what we may have always believed to be true we tend to skip past them. **Our eyes and ears gravitate to something that is less challenging so that we need not make an adjustment in our thinking or way of life.** Many of us do not like absolutes. We seek the so-called middle ground and look for grey in words written in black and white. Someone once said it is asking the question how much can I sin and still get in? When we do that, we are not led to a deeper faith in Jesus, but to something called cafeteria Christianity. We will take some of this and some of that, while passing on that and refusing to even consider this. We have many tools available that can help us to study and apply the Scriptures, and unfortunately a pair of scissors is not one of them. **Like Nicodemus, we must learn to love imperatives and absolutes if we are to grow in our faith.**

An imperative is something of vital importance, something we must do. An absolute is something unconditionally and universally true, always and everywhere. Jesus brings us several in our Scripture lesson this morning.

Verse 3: I **assure** you, unless someone is born anew, **it's not possible** to see God's kingdom.

Verse 5: I **assure** you, unless someone is born of the water and the Spirit, **it's not possible** to see God's kingdom.

Verse 7: Don't be surprised that I said to you, 'You **must** be born anew.'

Verse 13: **No one** has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

In the Scriptures, belief in Jesus and being reborn are synonymous, they mean the same thing. In the Scriptures, Gods kingdom and eternal life are synonymous, they mean the same thing. The imperative John would have us see is this: To have a place in God's kingdom, to have eternal life, one **must** believe in Jesus. It is vitally important.

And then John brings us one of the most beautiful absolutes in all the Scriptures. Ironically it is also one of the best known, John 3:16. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that **everyone** who believes in Him won't perish but will have eternal life. Everyone! It is an exact opposite of "no one". The word of God is for the people of God and the promise in John 3:16 is that everyone can choose to believe in Jesus and become part of the kingdom of God. It is absolutely true, no if, ands or buts allowed. It is an absolute truth that is only discovered through the Scriptures, and it is a clue to solving the mystery of why.

God gave His Son Jesus Christ so that the world might be saved rather than condemned. He also sent the Holy Spirit to help us to recognize and believe that truth. **What is no longer a mystery is that the God of the Scriptures is love.** What remains a mystery is why some will be attracted to the light of the Gospel and reap the many fruits of spending time with God in the Scriptures, while others will choose to reap the fruits of darkness.

Even so, God is always perfectly just, and God's ways are always perfectly just. Such a God deserves our love and attention. During this Lenten season and beyond, let us spend much time with Him in the Scriptures. It is there that we will discover or rediscover the exclusive, inclusive and absolute truth that Jesus loves us. It's exclusive in that belief in Jesus and Jesus alone, brings new life and an endless view of eternity. It's inclusive in that it doesn't matter where you have been or what you have done Jesus still loves you and offers a chance to start over with a new birth and a new life in Him. Let us share that absolute truth, our faith and our love with someone this week! Amen