

AM John 1:1-18 & 3:1-21

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[0 : 00] This is on page 1068 and we're going to read the first 18 verses.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made.

In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light that all might believe through him.

He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light. The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him yet the world did not know him.

[1 : 20] He came to his own and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And we have seen his glory. Glory as of the only Son from the Father. Full of grace and truth. John bore witness about him and cried out, This was he of whom I said, He who comes after me ranks before me.

Because he was before me. And from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses.

Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only God who is at the Father's side. He has made him known.

[2 : 30] And we'll leave the reading there and we pray that God would bless that to us. Well before we go into... This is on page 1070.

And it's going to read from verse 1 down to 21. John chapter 3 verse 1. Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God. For no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Jesus answered him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, How can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

[3 : 37] That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows what it wishes and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus said to him, How can these things be? Jesus answered him, Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And 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.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

[4 : 53] 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. 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.

And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world. And people have loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

And again, we pray that God would bless that to us. Okay. Well, like I said at the beginning, it's good to be home. And I've never, although I've been in this building many times, I've never really stood up here before.

And so this is all new to me. And this might be the only time I do this here anyway. And you just don't know. And so when I was thinking about what I was going to preach on, when I came down here, you've got the whole Bible to look at and it's not easy to think about.

[6 : 13] So I thought, as I thought about it, I thought probably best to go back to the beginning of my story and where my life was changed and it was changed in this verse, there's this verse here, verse 16 of chapter 3 of John's Gospel.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

And so this verse changed my life and there's a song I really love listening to. It's called Back to the Start and the chorus is Back to the Start where you found me.

I gave you my heart again. Take everything. I'm all I can bring. I'm coming home again. And so as I come home today, it's great to be here, like I say, and we thought for a few moments we'd look at this verse and although it's well known as one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible, it's so good to be reminded of the core truth of the Bible and changing hope as Christians.

So I'm just going to give a brief context of where this verse is found before we really try and focus in on it. So Jesus is speaking. Jesus said these words and he's having a conversation with a man called Nicodemus who is a ruler of the Jews and he had come to see Jesus and they were talking back and forth.

[7 : 36] Nicodemus asking questions and Jesus talking. And although this verse is very important and very clear, there's actually quite a lot of difficult imagery in the verses that we read.

But then in verse 16, there's this moment of absolute clarity and simplicity. It's a whole story of human history. It's summarized in just a few words. And so all I'm going to do is break the verse down into four sections and work through them and we'll see how we get on.

So the first section is just simply, For God so loved the world. As we think about that, it's going to start at the end. What it is that the world is and when Jesus is referring to it.

And he's talking about creation. He's talking about humanity. He's talking about every individual. And at the beginning of creation, when God made everything, everything was perfect.

Everything was good. But as we know in Genesis chapter 3, we read that humanity, Adam and Eve, the first people who God had made, who had been made perfect, they rejected God.

[8 : 40] And in pride, they went their own way. They did their own thing. And since then, every single person, all the way through to ourselves today, we've been infected.

There's a verse in Romans, this is a book later in the Bible, chapter 5 verse 12, it says, Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin. And so death spread to all men and women because all sin.

So every person here has been infected by that same disease, sin. And so the first question we ask ourselves is, do I see that in myself? It's all very well, looking at everybody else and seeing all their problems.

But what about me? You know, Isaiah 53, there's an amazing chapter, and verse 6 says, all we, like sheep, have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way.

And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. But the point here is, do we see it in ourselves that I've gone astray, I've gone my own way, that actually everything in me is actually going away from God rather than towards him.

[9 : 46] And it's important that we take on that personal responsibility as we think about that. But why is that so serious? Because in Scotland today, not many people seem to think this is a big deal.

It's fair to say that the vast majority of people in Dumfries and across Scotland aren't concerning themselves with this sort of thing today. And the big reason for that is they don't really want to.

People don't want to think about the big issues of life. They want to think about today and tomorrow. They don't want to think about where did I come from? Where am I going? And a lot of the time neither do we if we're honest.

And it all comes down to thinking about where did we come from? Who is it that made us? Where have we come from? And are we a series of freak accidents over billions of years?

And if that's the case then there's no authority, there's no accountability and that sounds quite good. But also there's no justice, there's no meaning, there's no love, there's no hope and there's no real future.

[10 : 48] And by nature we don't want to have authority or accountability in our lives. But we do want justice and meaning and love and hope. But we can't have it both ways.

So what do we do about that? And C.S. Lewis, a great writer from a while ago now, he said an amazing line where he said, when we find ourselves looking, when we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.

So when we find ourselves yearning for justice, our meaning, our love and hope that will last, but we find that this world can't fully satisfy that.

We get glimpses but we don't have that full satisfaction. That's because we're made for something more. Again, Ecclesiastes, this is a book in the Old Testament, chapter 3, verse 11, it says that God has put eternity into the heart of man.

So that we have a knowledge and a desire for something more than the here and now, even though so much of the time we distract ourselves with all the things that are here and now.

[12:01] The Bible teaches us that God has made us for his pleasure and he's made us for our good. So we are accountable to him. But we, the world, both collectively and individually, we've rejected our maker and all that he offers and this has consequences because how could it not?

You know, a few weeks ago I was walking home from work and there was a guy in front of me walking along and on his jacket was written a whole load of things and one of the big things that was there was written justice for all.

Just this one line, justice for all. I don't know what the jacket was all about. He obviously thought a lot about it himself but it made me think what would it be like if there was justice for all?

What would that mean? What would happen if God gave us what we really deserve? Psalm 130 in the Old Testament asks this. It says, what would happen if God kept account of our sins?

And the reality is no one could stand before him because we would all be judged and it would end in disaster because all have sinned.

[13:07] We are all deserving that the life that God has given to us would be removed from us. We've turned away from the life giver.

So what else do we expect apart from death as our ultimate punishment? And again, it's one thing seeing that in the world around us or being negative about a collective group of people but the thing is do we see it for ourselves?

In Isaiah chapter 6 again in the Old Testament Isaiah gets a glimpse of God's glory and when he sees that he just says woe is me I am undone I am ruined and I guess the question for me and the question for you this morning is when did you last think that?

When did you last have that sense of total and full exposure before God? That sense of being naked before him and I have nothing to offer because you just know you're sinful inside there's a brokenness inside and God is pure and there's just this chasm between us and no amount of religion no amount of good works is going to fix this problem it's surely only further pride when you think about it to think that somehow we can impress God enough by doing certain things or going certain places or not doing other things that somehow that's going to actually fix our complete brokenness because we're totally incapable so that's the world but then we see that same section for God so loved the world so God loves this world which is so broken and that world includes me and includes you so God irreverently speaking he's got this dilemma he's got this this justice within him which demands that our sin our rebellion must be dealt with and the only fitting answer for our rejection for our rejection of him is his rejection of us forever but his love means that he doesn't want this to happen because he's made us to have a relationship with him so what does he do can you see that issue can you see that issue where there's this this dilemma in a sense as far as we can see it from God's perspective there's a dilemma of his justice his goodness where sin must be dealt with but also his love for us which means he wants us to be with him and how does how does that get resolved how can there be reconciliation but before we get there we really have to see this is a personal predicament okay it's not just a theory it involves me it involves you it involves every single person but also

God's personal love is real this love is not just a general love he loves me and that's what changed everything for me when I was younger in a sense when I was younger I had all the bits of the jigsaw I could see all the parts as far as I could at that point of the Bible knowing I was a sinner and God loves the world but somehow I couldn't put all the pieces of the jigsaw together I was terrified of God's justice I knew I deserved to be punished for my sin but God then it was explained to me that God loves me actually me personally okay I don't know if you've ever looked at Google Earth Google wasn't invented back then I don't think but when I was young but Google Earth when you look at the world from online and you maybe type in your address and it zooms in slowly slowly slowly and it comes in closer and closer and suddenly you can see your house and your back garden and in this case it was like God's love coming right into me personal and that sense of being loved by him just blew my mind and it's an amazing thing you know

[16:54] Tim Keller's got an amazing line when he speaks about marriage and he says to be loved but not known is comforting but superficial to be known and not loved is our greatest fear but to be fully known and truly loved is being loved by God because we think if people really knew me if I think if people really knew me if they knew the stuff that goes on inside my mind and my heart they would want nothing to do with me they certainly wouldn't love me but God knows us better than anyone else he knows us better than we know ourselves in fact he sees right to the depths of our souls to who we really are and that's a fairly terrifying thought but it makes total sense if he made us of course he sees right through us right into us but when he looks at us he loves us not because of what he sees within us but because of who he is it's his very character his very character is a character of love and because of this love he has broken down every barrier that we have put up so that we can know his love personally each one of us so at the end of this first point the question is do you see yourself in the world that has rejected God do you admit that you're part of that and personally you have rejected

God and also at the same time do you see yourself that you're loved by God personally that he knows you and we've got he has done he has got every reason to reject us as we would do ourselves because of our rejection of him he's got every reason to reject us and that's what we would do in his position but thankfully wonderfully his ways are higher than our ways we read that in Isaiah 55 his ways are higher his ways are greater so at the cross of Jesus the love of God and the justice of God meet in a way that we'll never fully comprehend but we can never tire of meditating on so how does God love us how much does he love us well that takes us on to the second point for God so loved the world that he gave his only son and Christmas is all about this it's all about God giving his son into the world to save his people so many verses that could be thought about in relation to that

I'll just read a couple Isaiah 7:14 therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign behold the virgin will conceive and bear a son and you shall call his name Emmanuel which means God with us so God is giving of himself so that through God through Jesus he is actually with us Romans 5:8 God shows his love for us and that while we were still sinners Christ died for us so while we were still sinners while we were still in rebellion going away from God God sent his son Jesus Christ to die for us Romans 8:32 it says he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also with him graciously give us all things he gave God gave Jesus up for us all he spared others for example he spared

Isaac from Abraham's knife he spares those who believe in Jesus but he did not spare his own precious perfect son he gave us he gave him up for us all so God so loved the world that he gave his only son at the birth of Jesus the angel announced to the shepherd that a saviour is born for you and just before his death Jesus said to his disciples this is my body broken for you this is the language of giving and it's of a personal nature not just of a general nature and to top it off Galatians 2:20 the end of that verse says the son of God loved me and gave himself for me you know if this verse wasn't in the Bible some might try to argue that God giving his son to save the world was somehow an impersonal general coverage but no it is personal you're taken back to that song most of us learnt when we were kids

Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so and you kind of say what else do we need there's a quote from Alistair Begg I'll just read out I found very helpful in this it says there is no other way for sinners to be made right with God if there were then Christ would have died for nothing but no when Christ died on the cross it did not serve merely as an example or as a display of God's love although it was those things too most fundamentally when Christ died it accomplished salvation for sinners the ignoble death of a first century Galilean man did all of this what a wonder and yet that is not the greatest marvel of all the greatest astonishment is not that it was done but that it was done for you and for me we will never grasp the depth of it the magnitude of the love that brought him to that cross and so we joyfully confess with

[22:38] Paul that on the cross the son of God loved me and gave himself for me he died in my place Jesus taking the punishment on the cross instead of me in hell forever God the father giving his only holy son perfect and pure so that we might be free so there's this great exchange that we read of in 2nd Corinthians 5:21 again that's later on in the New Testament and that verse just simply says for our sake God made him Jesus to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God out of love for us Jesus taking the punishment due to us so that we don't have to bear it in hell forever so we're led back to that verse we had at the beginning of the service 1st John 3:1 see what kind of love the father has given to us that we should be called children of

God and so we are when we trust in him we're children of God brought into his family John said this and I read this during the week and I was just amazed by it he said the concept of substitution may be said to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation for the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone God accepts penalties which belong to man alone so no wonder the hymn writer says how marvelous how wonderful my song will ever be how marvelous how wonderful is my saviour's love for me but how do I know it's actually for me and that takes us to the third point that whoever believes in him whoever that's as broad as it gets the gospel is open to all and it should be proclaimed to all it's so broad and yet so personal again come back to my own story when you swap the words in the verse world and whoever for your own name so it becomes for God so loved

Andy that he gave his only son that if Andy believed in him he would not perish but have eternal life but what does it actually mean to believe in Jesus really believe not like the demons believe not just intellectually what does it actually mean to know that his saving work on the cross is for me and it means that I have been saved from my sins this is crucial there's three pictures maybe just to help us with it the first one is what we had with the children earlier with this massive wrapped up paper down there the idea of receiving Jesus to ourselves okay and it's no good basically what I was trying to say to the kids was it's not about just acknowledging Jesus or admiring him that's a good start but it's not just about that it's about receiving to all who received him he gave the right to become children of God and so we take Jesus to ourselves into our hearts we ask him to be lord of our hearts we don't just look at him from a distance he's right in there another picture for my childhood is to have childlike trust and as hard as it is to believe this morning

I'm reliably informed fairly docile child mainly apparently I just sat around they thought there was something wrong on my legs for a while I'm told I like to think I was just trusting in my mum and knowing that even though I couldn't see her she was off doing stuff I knew she'd be coming back so I was just sat still I didn't panic I just took it easy and there's a certain childlike trust that I like to think of I don't think I was being lazy but you never know there's a certain childlike trust I like to think of in that as a child we don't know everything we hardly know anything we can't control anything but we trust the one who does and so a childlike trust is to believe in Jesus that we don't know everything we can't control anything but we trust in the one who does and coming back to that idea of trust back when I was at church camp as a teenager one of the things that we did was abseiling and we get hooked up on a load of ropes and go off down a cliff and that was fairly terrifying for me because the big question was is this rope actually going to hold me like really hold me as I lean back and let the rope take my weight

I'm totally relying on the rope on this tree that is wrapped around and whoever it was that tied the knots none of it's down to me and that moment of leaning back and letting my weight be taken on the rope trusting that it would hold me that wasn't easy there was other folks at the camp who were bouncing off down the cliff like it was no problem for me it was a big problem and to learn to trust to lean back that point where your life is in the hands of that rope is leaning back into Jesus casting our worries on him both the smallest and the biggest things ultimately that we would trust him that even in the process of dying as scary as that is we believe that he'll be with us throughout that nothing can separate us from his love and that he'll be there for us on the other side can I lean back into that promise I'm asking myself even if we're trembling a bit but trusting that he's got me you know no other person who loves me no status or popularity in life no bank balance or investment fund can absolutely guarantee our security only Jesus only Jesus says

[29 : 06] I'll never leave you nor forsake you so do you believe do I believe and as we end one year and God willing soon go into another year it's a good time to reflect and to resolve you know what difference are these truths actually making in my life am I believing am I trusting in Jesus as my Lord not just my saviour but as my Lord am I following him is his ways governing my choices both small and great so as we go into this new year it's good to think about the way that we're following Jesus the way that we're believing that his way is better even though it might cost us because that's when you really know if you believe it's when you choose a direction of travel that even though it might cost you you're believing that Jesus way is better so as we look at the year ahead have we got a plan have each of us got a plan for our daily Bible reading and prayer have we got a plan in place for this it doesn't need to be spectacular but if we're not planning to draw close to Jesus and thinking about what that's going to look like on a practical level each day then the chances are it's not going to happen so talk to someone about that if you don't have a plan in place think over the next couple of days and make a plan how am I going to draw close to Jesus believe in him and know his ways through the

Bible each day what's the time I feel like I'm running out of time here so yeah I am so we're going to move on to the last part section 4 we shall not so for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not die but have eternal life and as much as this is not a popular world view the Bible is clear Jesus is clear that without a personal belief and trust in Jesus everything is ultimately hopeless and ends in death which makes total sense when we've rejected the author of life and doing so that the result of that would be a death which is eternal agonizing and ongoing in death and that used to terrify me to be in hell and Jesus talks about this more than anyone else in the Bible but the whole message of the Bible the whole point of this verse is that it doesn't have to be this way

God has reached into the mess of this world the mess of each one of us and he's changed it all through Jesus so for those who trust in him and I pray that's every person here today the hope of heaven the hope of eternal life is a reality that spurs us on in whatever God has for us for the rest of today the rest of our lives so what is eternal life well over the last few days I've been driving around quite a lot it feels like I've been driving home for ages on Wednesday I drove home to Lewis yesterday I drove back home to Edinburgh today I drove home to Dumfries and tomorrow God willing I'm driving back home to Edinburgh and it sort of makes you as you do all that driving it makes you wonder about what home is what it all means and so when you think about that we think about home as being a place of safety a place where you're happy where you're known or where you're loved where there's a stability but even when we've got places and people in our lives that have been home for 40 or 50 or even longer 40 or 50 years maybe even longer they don't last forever and so that

C.S. Lewis quote from the beginning comes into play we think about that way that we're yearning we're longing for something greater we're looking ultimately for our forever home and I think we're all looking for that we're all looking for that place of home forever to be secure to have that sense of belonging where worries are ceased there's people who love us and we love and a purpose that will never leave us restless or unfulfilled but will bring us only increasing joy in heaven with our saviour Jesus rejoicing in who he is and the love shown to us by God the Father through him that's eternal life and in some senses that starts now for every Christian but while we're in this life there's always a sense of not yet we're not there yet and although we've got this great wonderful love that we can know through Jesus now we're longing for heaven we're longing for that sense of home and the opposite the opposite of that is hell and that's a kind of eternal homelessness full of fear broken dreams loneliness anguish and regret but for everyone here today it doesn't need to be like that it really doesn't and that doesn't have to be your destination so you

I guess what I'm saying is I'm asking to anyone here who doesn't yet believe in Jesus come to him today you know we don't need to sit there admiring him and thinking about that I'll do that someday sometime it's coming to him today finding your forever home in him and if you'd like to chat about that please talk to a Christian that you know I'd be happy to have a chat with you after the service if that would help but please come to Jesus I'm just going to leave it there thank you for listening and I'm just going to pray let's just pray Lord God we thank you for Jesus our saviour help us we pray to see more of him see more of his beauty see more of his sacrifice what it cost him to save us from our sins help us we pray to give our all to him our whole lives not hold anything back but to trust him with everything we've got help us each one of us we pray in Jesus name amen we'll sing with an amazing