

WHY DID GOD SEND HIS SON INTO THE WORLD?

JOHN 3:17

“For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

A. The primacy of the love of God, positively emphasized, .v. 16.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

B. The primacy of the love of God, negatively emphasized, .v. 17.

Misconceptions about the coming of Jesus Christ abound, and they are just as numerous concerning the relationship of the Father and His sending of His Son in this same connection. So John here qualifies the coming of Messiah, even as most likely Nicodemus confused his first coming with the judgment rightly associated with his second coming (Dan. 7:9-22).

1. The wrong understandings of Jesus' coming.

- a. Singular emphasis on Jesus Christ, or “Jesuolatry,” or “Jesus only,” is rejected here since the Father continues to be He who purposes the mediatorial plan of redemption and directs the mediatorial work of the Son.
- b. The angry Father placated by the intervening Son is rejected since, as with v. 16, He here purposes to save sinners, not judge them (Rom. 3:24). Thus the saving motivation of the Father and the Son is identical.
- c. The intention of imminent judgment, especially that view of the Jews concerning a conquering Messiah who will only judge their Gentile foes, which misunderstanding Jesus corrects (Luke 13:1-9). Edersheim explains:

[T]he general conception which the Rabbis had formed of the Messiah, differed totally from what was presented by the Prophet of Nazareth. . . . The Rabbinic idea of the Messiah was not that of ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of His people Israel’—the satisfaction of the wants of humanity, and the completion of Israel’s mission. . . . So far as their opinions can be gathered from their writings, the great doctrines of Original Sin, and of the sinfulness of our whole nature, were not held by the ancient Rabbis. . . . In the absence of felt need of deliverance from sin, we can understand, how Rabbinic tradition found no place for the Priestly office of Messiah, and how even His claims to be the Prophet of His people are almost entirely overshadowed by His appearance as their King and Deliverer.¹

Perhaps, as a new disciple, Nathaniel reflected this misunderstanding (1:49).

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, pp. 160, 164, 165, 167.

2. The right understanding of Jesus as a judge.

However, if Jesus has not come “to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him,” how then can he say: “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind,” 9:39, cf. 5:27? The word κρίνω, *krinō*, as in 3:17; 12:47, does mean “to judge” in a forensic sense as the Jews had in mind, whereas in 9:39 the meaning is clearly of discriminating “judgment,” κρίμα, *krima*. So here in vs. 18-19 we have the thought of “judgment that distinguishes” between those who are convinced they are sinners in need of salvation and those who are not; this “judgment” incorporates the purpose of Christ coming to save.

3. The right understanding of Jesus’ coming.

Thus Jesus found it necessary to declare the precise purpose of his coming to the Jews in general, and even the like of Nicodemus in particular, time and time again, and this also necessitated his repeated emphasis of the profound sinfulness of both Jew and Gentile.

a. The revelation by Jesus of man’s sinfulness.

This has already been indicated, 1:10; 1:29; 3:14, though there will be greater emphasis in subsequent public discourse, 4:16-18, 29; 7:19-20, 37; 8:5-9, 21-24, 33-36, 40-44; 9:39. John Newton provides a graphic picture of this leprosy that afflicts Jews and Gentiles.

The texture of the human frame is admirable. The natural capacities of the mind of man, the powers of his understanding, will, and affections, the rapidity of imagination, the comprehension of memory, especially in some instances, are so many proofs, that considered as a creature of God, he is a noble creature; and though he is debased and degraded by sin, there are traces of his original excellence remaining, sufficient to denominate him in the words of the poet, “majestic though in ruins.” But if you suppose him rich, powerful, wise, in the common sense of the words, he is brittle as a potter’s vessel, and while possessed of every possible advantage, he is but like the grass or the flower of the field, which, in its most flourishing state, falls in a moment at the stroke of the scythe, and withers, and dies. A fever, a fall, a tile, a grain of sand, or the air that finds its way through a crevice, may be an overmatch for the strongest man, and bring him down hastily to the grave. By a small change in the brain, or some part of the nervous system, he who now prides himself in his intellectual abilities may soon become a lunatic or an idiot. Disease may quickly render the beauty loathsome, and the robust weak as infancy. There are earthen and china vessels, which might possibly endure for many ages, if carefully preserved from violence. But the seeds of decay and death are sown in our very frame. We are crushed before the moth, and molder away untouched under the weight of time!²

² John Newton, *Works* (One Volume), p. 762.

- b. The revelation by Jesus of his coming to save sinners.

Note that “world” is quoted three times in this verse, surely in harmony with v. 16, having the same broad inclusive meaning, after the manner of 1:10, which continues through to the end of chapter 12 in 6:14; 7:4; 8:12, 23, 26; 9:5 10:36 11:27; 12:46.³ It is significant that when Jesus withdraws in chapter 13 to the upper room with his disciples, there is repeated distinction made between the world at large and the elect, 13:1; 14:17, 19, 22, 27; 15:19; 17:6, 9, 14, 16, 25. Hence “world” here is not identical with the “elect,” even though it incorporates them.⁴

Thus Jesus came, “that the world [as a dark entity] might [should] be saved [from perishing] through Him.” This “world” includes, “Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female” (Gal. 3:28) from “every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev. 7:9). But in the earthly ministry of this Son of God, the universal qualification that he emphasized above all these variables was that of being a candidate for destruction, a lost sinner that needed to be saved. And this is the qualification that men have found the most difficult to confess. Consider the key verse, Mark 10:45, where Jesus has come to “ransom” men bound in sin; consider the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son (Luke; 15:1-7, 8-10, 11-32); consider the declaration of Jesus to Zaccheus, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

³ J. C. Ryle puts it this way: “The ‘world’ means the whole race of mankind, both saints and sinners, without any exception. The word, in my opinion, is so used in John 1:10, 29; 6:33, 51; 8:12; Rom. 3:19; II Cor. 5:19; I John 2:2; 4:14. The ‘love’ spoken of is that love of pity and compassion with which God regards all His creatures, and specially regards mankind. It is the same feeling of ‘love’ which appears in Psalm 145:9; Ezek. 33:11; John 6:32; Titus 3:4; I John 4:10; II Pet. 3:9; I Tim. 2:4. It is a love unquestionably distinct and separate from the special love with which God regards His saints. It is a love of pity and not of approbation or complaisance. But it is not the less a real love.” *John*, I, pp. 158-9.

⁴ J. C. Ryle further comments in this regard: “Those who confine God’s love exclusively to the elect appear to me to take a narrow and contracted view of God’s character and attributes. They refuse to God that attribute of compassion with which even an earthly father can regard a profligate son, and can offer to him pardon, even though his compassion is despised and his offers refused. I have long come to the conclusion that men may be more systematic in their statements than the Bible, and may be led into grave error by idolatrous veneration of a system.” *Ibid.*, p. 159.