

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

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Sometimes it is good, right and salutary that we focus on the simple things, the basic things, the essential things. That's why it is good to pause once again and contemplate the simple beauty, wonder and glory of the words of our text today. These words must surely be among the best known words in all of Scripture. It has been said that if a person could only hear one bible passage in their life, this should be the passage they hear. This has been called the “Gospel in a nutshell”, for it contains the whole of God's plan of salvation summed up in these few words. Another preacher said that these words are so wonderfully simple that they are simply wonderful. Together with the rest of our Gospel lesson today, they speak great comfort to the sinful heart. They speak of the great love that God has for us, the love that gave so much that we might be saved. They tell us what must happen for us to have that salvation.

The first person to hear these words from Jesus was a man by the name of Nicodemus. John tells us: ***“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.”***” (John 3:1-2, ESV) Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, perhaps to keep his visit secret from the other Pharisees. Maybe he thought it would give him more of an opportunity to talk with Jesus. What matters is that Nicodemus came to see Jesus. He was aware of the miracles that Jesus had been doing, and that impressed him. The things that Jesus said and did made it clear that Jesus had come from God. Nicodemus was one of the devout Jews, a man looking for the kingdom of God. I think it is fair to say that his visit has something to do with the question that so many have asked in one way or another: “what must I do to be saved?”

Imagine, then, how frustrated Nicodemus must have felt when Jesus says he must be ‘born again’. The words, *born again* can also mean *born from above*. We do know that Nicodemus was confused. This was an impossibility, he says. ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”***” (John 3:4, ESV) Jesus then talks about being born of water and the Spirit. He talks about faith, especially when He comes to the words so dear to us: ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.***

Nicodemus may have been a member of the Jewish ruling council, and well-versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. But he is also just like every other person on the face of the earth. He is someone who needs to know—and who wants to know—what must I do to be saved?

We live in an age where faith is often reviled, seen as an archaic idea that has no basis in a progressive world. Many see faith as a crutch. It does seem that people are more inclined to believe that you live, you get old, you die—and that's all there is. But for all the bravado we hear from people, there is also a desire—yes, even a need to know—that there is something more. The writer of Ecclesiastes said: ***“[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”*** (Ecclesiastes 3:11, ESV) I haven't met a person yet who finds comfort at the cemetery, simply knowing that life is over. Oh, they may act like everything is fine, but we want to know that there is something more. We hope that there is the glory and peace that we think of as heaven. In fact, every religion in the world has some sort of heaven or paradise or bliss. It is often the only thing that keeps us going, as we struggle with the cares, the problems and the worries of life in this world.

The fact that all religions teach that there is a heaven doesn't mean that they are all true. It also doesn't guarantee that people can get to heaven the way that many religions teach. We are mindful of Jesus' words: ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*** (John 14:6, ESV) That is why people want to know—why they need to know—“what must I do to be saved?”

Our text is the answer to that question. It really is so simple when it comes right down to it. ***“For God so loved the world, that***

he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Apart from true Christianity, all the world’s religions teach that you have to earn heaven. Heaven’s glory is not earned through good works. It is not available to the highest bidder. It is not a matter of bribing God, or convincing him that we are good enough. Heaven’s glory is open to all through faith in Jesus Christ. Our text talks about God’s love for us, the love that moves Him to give us His Son. If we think about that with an honest appraisal of how loveable we really are, we would say that God is crazy to love us. Why would God want to love people who so often seem to prefer war to peace? Why would God want to love people who lie and who cheat one another? Why would God want to love people who deny His creation, especially His creation of us as male and female? Why would God want to love people who have no time for Him; who deny Him; who think that they can do whatever they want without any regard for His holy law? Why would God want to love people who really don’t care about others because they are too busy caring about themselves? Before you pat yourself on the back and think, ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”*** (Luke 18:11, ESV) maybe you should take a closer look at God’s Word and the mirror of His law. We all are sinners. We are those unloving, self-centred, selfish and spiteful people. Scripture says it so clearly: ***“None is righteous, no, not one;”*** (Romans 3:10, ESV) Thankfully, God’s love is greater than our sin. God, in His love gave His Son to bear the burden, guilt and shame of all that we have done wrong. His love covers everyone—yes, each and every person on this earth. Jesus endures the shame of the cross for the whole world. He dies for us all. He brings us forgiveness and newness of life as He rises from the dead.

And yet, not everyone is saved. We need to hear all that Jesus said to Nicodemus: ***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*** This wonderful forgiveness and life are ours through faith. All we have to do is believe. It’s just that simple and yet, in the Small Catechism, Luther begins his explanation of the 3rd Article of the Apostle’s Creed by saying: ***“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.”*** (SC, 3rd Article) If you reduce those words to the most basic truth, we end up saying, “I believe that I cannot believe”. But I have to believe if I am going to be saved. Thankfully, even that faith we need comes to us through the grace of God. St. Paul reminds us: ***“Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.”*** (1 Corinthians 12:3, ESV) Luther goes on: ***“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”*** (SC, 3rd Article) As Paul assured us in the Epistle lesson, it’s all about God’s grace to us. God brings us to faith as the Holy Spirit works through the Gospel and through the Sacraments. God keeps us in faith. God makes us aware of our sin and our need for forgiveness, and He leads us to the foot of the cross, so that we can let go of the burden of sin and shame in our lives as the forgiving love of Christ flows over us. Now, covered in that grace of Christ, ***“we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*** (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)

Forgiven and free by grace through faith we don’t have to worry about what we have to do to be saved. We know that ***God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*** We simply trust in Christ, who died and rose for us, with the faith the Holy Spirit works in us. When Jesus talks about believing in Him, He uses an illustration from Israel’s past. During the Exodus, when the people grumbled against Moses and complained that God wasn’t fair even though He continued to provide them with food and all the necessities of life, God sent poisonous snakes among them, and many people died. There was no earthly cure. There was not anti-venom. Poisoned and dying, the people could do nothing to save themselves. But God gave Moses the cure. ***“And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”*** (Numbers 21:8–9, ESV) All the people had to do was to look at that bronze serpent and they would be healed. It was so simple—but it took faith.

We look to the Saviour, who was lifted up on the cross, and looking to Him we find perfect healing. The devil’s poison no longer has any power over us. It has no power over all those who believe, all those who look to the cross. In every land, in every tongue, the promise is still the same: ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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.”*** Amen.