

Introduction:

Who likes reading the same news or hearing the same story over and over again? Maybe you can read a book or watch a movie a few times but generally speaking people don't like hearing or reading or watching the same content again and again. It gets boring. It gets predictable. We like new News. New Content. No one likes hearing the same joke 3 times in a row. Maybe the first time you laugh out loud. The second time you give a smile. And then the third time you have a blank face. You don't react. It doesn't have the same WOW factor. We can have the same mentality when we come to the bible. Especially for passages which are very familiar to us. John 3:16 is probably the most famous bible passage apart from Genesis 1:1. It is probably the most quoted bible passage. The most memorised bible verse. Sadly, It is probably the most misquoted. It has often been misinterpreted. It has been butchered by all sorts of faith and people. And very often read out of context. Many who have read and memorised this verse probably don't know what verse 17-21 says and probably what precedes it.

Today we are going to look at verse 16-21 and see 3 things,

1. Unfathomable Love of God (v16-17)
2. Unbelief Condemned Already (v18)
3. Unquestionable Judgement (v19-21)

Unfathomable Love of God (v16-17)

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.

Verse 16-17 teaches us the greatness of God's love. Love which is unfathomable. Incomprehensible. And this love is demonstrated in salvation. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus and in verse 15 he has told him "that whoever believes in him (the son of man) may have eternal life". We are in the topic of eternal life, salvation. Jesus continues and goes into the details of the motive, the extent and the way of salvation.

If you look at the very beginning of verse 16 you'll see that eternal life, salvation is driven by God's unfathomable love. For God so loved, Because God so loved, eternal life is possible. That's the motive. The reason behind the giving and sending of Jesus Christ is the love of God. Love. That's amazing. It wasn't because God was lonely. It wasn't because we deserved it. It was because of God's love. And that love is stressed by how he does it. It is done by sending the one and only son. The ESV just says only, but it is one and only. He is God's precious son.

We have the saying that "actions speak louder than words". Words mean nothing if it isn't followed by action. A boy can tell his girlfriend that he loves her so much that he will do anything for her. But until he puts a ring on it, until he commits and shows sacrificial love, words don't really mean anything. And I'm sure you have seen people in your life who have made promises, who have

said all sorts of things but never back it up with actions. And you question whether they really are genuine, if they really do love the other person. Similarly, in relationship to faith and works, in James 2:15-16, "15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?". Faith is demonstrated in works. And so, in the same way love is demonstrated by more than just words. God demonstrates love in an unfathomable way right? It is by the sending of the one and only son. John writes elsewhere in 1 John 4:9-10 he says, "9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Love is seen by the fact that God not only took the initiative to come to this world to save sinners but it is the fact that he came to be the propitiation for our sins. Because God is just and holy, he must punish sin. He hates sin. He has righteous wrath. Propitiation is when God has a change of attitude towards us because Jesus absorbs the wrath of God for us. Instead of us being enemies of God and taking the just punishment of sin, on the cross Jesus becomes the propitiation for our sins, the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Our judgement goes upon him and by faith in Jesus Christ, we have a restored relationship with the Father. That's mind blowing that God would send his precious son to do that for us. Can you imagine giving your life to your enemies, or even more, can you imagine giving your son's life for enemies? Unimaginable. Unfathomable love. Many will butcher verse 16 and use the love of God to justify their sinful actions. But the richness of his love can only be seen when you see the fact that we don't deserve to be saved. It can only be fully appreciated when you recognise that we need a saviour. God loved us and sent his one and only Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Notice the extent of this love. It is for the world. Sinful people. Rebellious people. It is for people who rejected God and hate him. Now to clarify, some take this to mean that Jesus's death saves the whole world. Some people believe that this verse teaches that everyone is saved by the blood of Jesus. Universalism. But what Jesus is getting at is not the "who is saved" but the "extent" of salvation. If you think about it, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus. He is a Jew, a Pharisee. He is a ruler of the Jews who believes that salvation belongs to the Jews only. Only for God's special chosen people. But what Jesus is getting at is that salvation, a special relationship with him is not only for the Jews, it is for the whole world. It is for the Jews, the Romans, the Ethiopians, the Europeans, the Chinese, Koreans, Americans and Australians. And so, in essence, "World" here speaks of "humanity". He didn't die just for the Jews, but for "humanity". And the method to be included in this salvation is by believing in the one and only son of God. It comes from believing. Trusting. Repenting and turning away from sin and towards God. It is submitting to his Lordship. *Whoever believes will not perish but have eternal life.* And so, Jesus is clear that Universalism isn't true. Although Jesus' death is sufficient for all, it is only effective for the elect, for those who believe. Now to clarify again, Jesus uses the word "whoever" and many have taken that to mean that every single person in this world has the ability to "choose God". They take it to mean that every single person has "ultimate decisive self-determinism" or what some call free-will. To clarify, that means the ability to make decisions without any influence whatsoever. Well we know that that's not biblical because the bible tells us that we are sinful and we are tainted by sin. Our quote on quote "free will" is to sin. Left to our own devices we will only want to reject God. Romans 3:10-12, "None

is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

And in the context of John 3 that is consistent. Because the only way to see the kingdom of God, or enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:3,5), is to be born again, to be born of the spirit, to have God work in our hearts a miracle. We need God to regenerate us. The person who can believe is the one who has been born again.

Now you could look at Jesus' words negatively and say that if I don't believe Jesus then I will perish. If I am not regenerate/ born of the Spirit then who cares what Jesus says. I am not meant to believe. But what you need to see is the unfathomable love of God. Because Jesus urges you to see that. Verse 17 says, *"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."* It is positive. You are to be shocked by the amazing love of God that made him give up his one and only son for you. He came to save not condemn. The question is will you believe? Will you surrender and submit under the authority of God? Will you repent and trust in him as your only way of Salvation? If you haven't repented, if you haven't recognised your sin and turned away from it. Then do that today. Salvation is here. Repent and believe in Jesus. This is the good news of the Gospel. In Mark 10:45, *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

The second thing we see is,

Unbelief condemned already (v18)

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.

Verse 16-17 is pointed more positively, although the reality of condemnation and perishing is there. Verse 18 flips it and looks at it more negatively. Although whoever believes is not condemned, whoever does not believe is condemned already. There is a great warning here. If you do not believe in the name of the only Son of God, there is condemnation. The warning is clear, there is no way to escape condemnation except belief. Later John 3:36 puts it this way, ³⁶ *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."* Although he uses the word obey instead of belief, true belief is followed with obedience. Faith without obedience is dead faith. And so, dead faith or no faith = wrath of God. Condemned already and wrath of God remains on him makes the same point. Verse 16-17 tells you to be amazed and overwhelmed by the unfathomable love of God, and then in verse 18 you are to be shocked and fearful of the fact that unbelief leads to condemnation.

I remember having a chat with a man on the bus one day. It was from QV in the city near Melbourne Central to Doncaster. It was peak traffic, so he was stuck with me for 40 minutes. I asked him whether or not he was religious. He said that he used to go to church when he was younger but not really. He would consider himself agnostic. He believed in heaven and hell. I remember sharing the Gospel with him. He replied to me saying that was all good and fine, but he reckons that he was good enough. He thought he did enough good things to stand right before God. I remember him saying to me that God will look at his life and he will see that he has done enough good things to merit into heaven. He said he didn't need Jesus. And maybe later he will come to

believe. Right now he wants to live his life, concentrate on university and then after life gets settled then he will start thinking more about religion. And I'm sure you have heard something similar. Maybe you have had a conversation which went exactly the same way.

I look at John 3:16 and indeed God so loves the world. But when I read it in its entirety, including verse 18, it doesn't say anything about good works meriting salvation. I only see unbelief meriting condemnation.

In fact unbelief is condemned already. That's a very interesting way of talking about condemnation. Because when we think about judgement, we think about end times. We think about when Christ comes again and judges the living and the dead. The full and final judgement. But in some sense, what Jesus is getting at is that condemnation is a present reality. Rejecting Christ now brings condemnation. This is because in the coming of Jesus, people are already in the condition for condemnation. They are sinful and they have rejected and rebelled against God. When the final judgement comes, those of unbelief, will confirm a verdict of self-judgement already passed. If you have unbelief then you are condemned already and you are just waiting for your punishment. R. C. Sproul says, "those who look to Christ escape condemnation, but those who refuse to trust Him are as good as condemned already". Don't wait to take Jesus seriously. If you don't take him seriously now, if you don't believe in him, then you are as good as condemned already.

And so, when we read verse 18, *"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."*, you should see the urgency of this verse. Sinners all around you are condemned already in some sense. They need Jesus. You need to tell them about the good news. The unfathomable love of God. And if they not repent and believe then they will perish.

I used to tutor a bit of maths in High School. One of my students didn't prioritise his subjects. He didn't focus on his Year 12 subject and spent a lot of time on subjects which didn't matter for his final score. I remember telling him multiple times that if he didn't study for his year 12 subject then he is guaranteed to not to do well in it. The way he studied set a course to failure. He was as good as failing the subject already. And that was evident in his tests throughout the year. Even though the year hadn't ended if he did not change the way he prioritised his time and studies then he would definitely get what he deserved.

Unbelief is on the course to final judgement. I need to, you need to tell others about Jesus. Unlike studying for a subject where there is a set date for the final exam, you don't know when life will end. No one can know tomorrow. The man I talked to on the bus wanted to wait until he was settled to take Jesus seriously. He does not know when he will meet his maker. I don't know when I will meet my maker. And you don't know when you will meet your maker and judge. Therefore, be burdened for the lost if you know Jesus already. And if you don't know Jesus then you need to believe in him now. Everyone is responsible for their belief. Unbelief is condemned already.

Finally, we see

Unquestionable Judgement (v19-21)

¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ 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."

In verse 16 Jesus uses the language of life and death. In verse 17-18 he shifts over to legal language. Language which you would see at a courtroom. Guilty and not guilty. Condemned or not condemned. These verses dealing with belief and unbelief terminology. In verse 19-21 there is shift of terminology. It is judgement in relationship to those who love darkness/evil and those who love the light/God.

Now if you read verse 17 it says that Jesus did not come to judge but in verse 19-21 there seems to be some judgement. You might say that's a contradiction. But what we have here is a new description. Jesus did not come to bring final and full judgement. Otherwise we wouldn't be here right now. Jesus will come again, and he will condemn. He will stand as judge. But in the coming of Jesus there is another form of judgement, which we kind of touched on in the previous point. The verdict, the unquestionable judgement is that the world in its moral darkness sinfully reject Jesus, God's Son. In the coming of Jesus there is proof that people morally reject God. The world is put on display and they have rejected Jesus. Therefore, the judgement is about why some believe and don't believe. He is digging deep. Getting to the root problem. Looking into our soul and heart.

(John 8:12) tells us that Jesus is the light of the world and so verse 19 which says "*this is the judgement... the light has come into the world*" it is talking about Jesus. As the light of the world he is the revelation of God and he is the perfect reflection of God's holiness, purity, truth and glory. He is the way the truth and life. And in the moment that Jesus walks among humanity, humanity has to make a decision. Are they going to embrace him, love him or are they going to reject him and love the darkness, love the lies of the of the world? It is a matter of allegiance. There are 2 kinds of people. There is the people who *love the darkness, who have works of evil, who does wicked things, hates the light and doesn't want to be exposed. They are people who love the darkness because their sin won't be exposed. They don't want to change. They love it. And therefore verse 20, they do not come to the light. And what's what happened.*

And the second group people are those who do the truth, who is honest, who recognises that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. They are people who act faithfully and honourably. And they come to Jesus in humility recognising they are sinful, and they need Him. Notice that the second group of people therefore is not acting out superiority. They are not any better than every other sinner. Rather they are acting in humility.

So, what Jesus does here is he pronounces a verdict, an unquestionable judgement on reality. We live in a sinful world and the world has rejected him. There are two ways to live, a life lived loving the darkness, loving wicked and evil things. Or a life lived loving the light, recognising your sinfulness and your need for him. This is about morality. How are you going to live?

The application and call are the same as the Israelites when they were given the bronze snake to look upon. In Numbers 21, the people spoke against God and against Moses and the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they were bitten, and many Israelites died. Because of their sinfulness they were punished. In verse 7 they responded saying, *"We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he takes away the serpents from us."* Moses then was to make a bronze serpent he lifted it up, and those who looked to the bronze serpent would live. In the same way, the son of Man was lifted up, he died on the cross, and everyone who has morally failed are to see the light. Look to Jesus in desperation, in humility and with unqualified faith. That is the only way to be saved. By such faith alone can anyone hope to be saved. Look at your life and see where you are at. Do you love the darkness, or do you love the light? Multiple times in 1 John we are called to examine ourselves. Those in the light love the light and hate the darkness. They morally live differently because they are transformed by the Spirit. 1 John 2:9-11, *"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."* There is an unquestionable judgement in the coming of Jesus. There is no excuse.

Conclusion:

There is a lot more things we could say about these few verses. But to conclude, I leave you with a few questions.

Does the unfathomable love of God, the fact that unbelief is condemned and that there is an unquestionable judgement blow your mind? Or is the good news that God sent his one and only son, something that you have heard a million times and it doesn't capture you. Does the fact that sinners will stand condemned and perish not change the way you live and act? Has John 3:16 become too repetitive and old? I suggest that it is truth which is unchanging, and it is the most important and greatest news of all time. And you are called to act. To repent and believe and to call others to do the same.