

DIVINE LOVE AND HUMAN RECIPROCATION

– *John 3:1-21.* –

This subject forms part of a memorable discourse preached by Jesus of Nazareth to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. The words, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life," must be understood in the light of their context, or they will be largely robbed of their beauty and power. It rarely happens that every element of this brief passage is taken into account; and yet, if anyone is left out the others become comparatively meaningless. It is necessary to consider each element in detail.

I. – THE EXTENT OF GOD'S LOVE.

This is expressed by a very familiar phrase, "the world." "The earth" is not "the world," nor is "the age." Both the words and their ideas are different. The world here contains many ages, but it is itself a unit. The primary idea of it appears to be that of "an arrangement," the human race under an arrangement. Of "the Word," who "was in the beginning with God," the Apostle says, "He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not" (John 1:10). The world here, which was made by "the Word," must include every individual of the human race, from the first man to the very last of his posterity. So with the world which God so loved, no individual who has descended from Adam can be beyond its scope. This is corroborated by another phrase in the immediate context – "That which is born of flesh is flesh." That which is born of the flesh is born into the world. "The flesh" and "the world," here, are co-extensive; and as these phrases cover every human being, so the love of God covers every human being. If the love of God does not extend to every man, the man to whom it does not extend cannot be part of "the flesh" spoken of here.

II. – THE PROOF OF GOD'S LOVE.

The love of God here does not supersede his justice. There is no genuine love where there is not absolute justice. God so loved the world that he GAVE his only begotten Son. The proof of God's love here is not in what he taught, or felt, or willed, or said, but in what he did: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." "He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for [R1328 : page 135] ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2; 4:9,10.) The same apostolic witness says, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). "The Word" and "the only begotten of the Father" here refer, of course, to the same person. Being made flesh, the sent of God and the gift of God refer to the same thing. Giving the Son, and sending him into the world, was making him flesh. In other words, these phrases all refer to one change – the change from his pre-human to his human existence. The idea of this change is not so much that from one locality to another, as it is from one nature to another. Being sent to the earth and being sent into the world (*kosmos* – arrangement) are not necessarily the same. Christ might be on the earth without being in the arrangement. He was sent into the arrangement, and he entered it when he became a factor of it. The chief need of those previously in the arrangement was never met, nor could it be met, until Christ met it. When genuine love gives, and gives wisely, it gives what is most needed. The love of God is real love, it is wise love. He gave that which meets the dire necessities of humanity, the dire necessities of every individual, from the first to the last.

There are those who see in the Son of God taking upon himself our nature, and becoming the propitiation for our sins, no proof of

the love of God. They say, That is proof of the Son's love, but where is the proof of the Father's? The answer is, In the Father's gift. A real father would much rather die himself than give a beloved child up to death. There is far more love displayed in God giving his only begotten and well-beloved Son up to death than there would have been in God dying himself, had that been possible. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13); "but God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The proof of the love of God is not only the most conclusive on record, but it is also the most conclusive conceivable.

III. – THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S LOVE.

In expressing this part of his subject our blessed Lord makes it as unmistakable and as forcible as possible. He says, "God sent not his Son into the world to judge (R.V.) the world." The world had been judged previously. The first life of the world had been judged in its entirety. That judgment was on the representative principle; and in it the whole world was judged in one man – the first Adam. God did not send his Son into the world to do that over again. Men blunder and have to do their work over again. God never blunders, nor has he ever to do his work over again. Christ says twice over that God sent his Son into the world that the world "should not perish." The world was already perishing. It had been perishing over four thousand years. God sent his Son into the world that it might not always perish. The penalty under which the world was perishing is death; and when a man is once really dead he is always dead, unless the penalty is nullified.

On the positive side, Christ says that God sent his Son into the world "that the world through him might be saved" – "might have everlasting life" – "might have eternal life." The word here rendered "everlasting" and "eternal" does not necessarily mean

endless. Competent authorities render it "age-lasting;" and the age may be long or short, according to the nature and circumstances of the case. Age-lasting life and salvation here are practically the same thing; and there can be neither soundness nor safety without untainted life. Salvation, of course, pertains to the whole man – physically, mentally, and morally – and when thus saved he continues to live. The purpose of God's love in sending his Son into the world is, in the first place, to nullify death – the first death; and, in the next place, to bring in untainted life – the second life. There could be no further judgment until untainted life was brought in, because the tainted life had previously been judged.

"Now is the judgment of this world." Now the world's crisis has come. Now. Not before. This is the beginning of the second judgment. The second judgment is the judgment of the world individually. There could be no [R1328 : page 136] individual judgment until there was individual untainted life, and there was no individual untainted life until Christ brought it in. Whenever and wherever he has been offered to any man, or will be offered to any man, his testing, trying, or proving has begun, or will begin. In view of this our blessed Lord exclaimed: "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out: and I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." – John 12:31,32.

IV. – THE RECIPROCATION OF GOD'S LOVE.

The extent of the love of God is the extent of the world; the proof of the love of God is the gift of his Son; and the purpose of the love of God is that the world might have life. These were all matters of fact over eighteen hundred years ago; but that does not put the world into possession of this life. There is a definitely prescribed medium through which this life is communicated to man; and every man has to use this medium for himself. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man

be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The Israelites sinned against Moses and against God. They were bitten by fiery serpents, and were perishing in consequence. By divine command, Moses made a brazen serpent and set it upon a pole. That brought it within the range of their vision; "and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass he lived." (Num. 21:4-9.) It was not when the serpent was made that the serpent-bitten men lived, nor was it when it was elevated: it was when they looked that they lived. Even so, it was not when "the Word was made flesh" that sin-bitten men lived, nor was it when the Son of Man was exalted, but it is when they look that they live. The serpent-bitten had to look with their physical eyes, and the sin-bitten have to look with their mental eyes. In each case the divinely-appointed medium of communication is looking, and that is indispensable. Looking with the eyes of the understanding is expressed by the word believing; and as this is the indispensable medium of communication it is imperative that there be no vital mistake respecting it. Recklessness will not do, nor will ignorance, nor superstition, nor credulity: it must be genuine faith.

1. The basis of faith is the testimony of God himself. – "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself; he that believeth not God hath made him a liar, because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son." "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the word of life." "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." "I pray for them; I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me." "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me **[R1329 : page 136]** through their word;

that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." (1 John 5:9,10; 1:1,3; John 17:9,20,21.) The testimony on which faith rests is not man's, it is God's own. Man had no testimony on this matter worth listening to until God spoke. God has made himself responsible for the extension of his testimony; and he who promised is faithful and sure to fulfil his promise. Those who live the life of God, breathe the Spirit of God, conform to the law of God, do the works of God, and speak the words of God, are the agency for the extension of God's testimony. "In due time" he will see that his testimony is extended, not only to "the ends of the earth," but to the uttermost extremities of "the world;" not only to every individual "on the earth," but also to every individual "under the earth."

2. *The testimony of God is (a) that Christ is the life of the world.* – God sent his Son into the world "that the world through him might be saved," and there is no complete salvation without untainted life. "This is the **[R1329 : page 137]** record, that God hath given to us age-lasting life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." "The bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world." "The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (1 John 5:11,12; John 6:33,51.) ***The testimony of God is (b) that Christ is the light of the world:*** "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." "That was the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." "I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 1:4,9; 8:12.) ***The testimony of God is (c) that Christ is the love of the world:*** "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light." "This is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren." "Hereby perceive we *love*, because he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay

down our lives for the brethren." (1 John 2:10; 3:11,14,16.) ***And the testimony of God is (d) that Christ is the judgment of the world:*** "This is the judgment, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." "As the Father raiseth up the dead and quickeneth them, even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son." "As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself and hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of Man." (John 3:19; 5:21-27.) Many talk about the judgment of the world without its love, and the love of the world without its light, and the light of the world without its life; but that completely reverses the divine order. Christ is the judgment of the world because he is its love, and he is its love because he is its light, and he is its light because he is its life. Some still talk about those who never heard the gospel being judged by "the light of nature," "the light of conscience," and so on. They might as well talk about them being judged by the light of darkness or enlightened by the life of death. The divine order is the life, the light, the love, and after that the judgment of the world. It is not enough that we exhort one another to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." It is imperative that we see that it is the faith for which we contend. We may contend for something called "the faith," or for this, that, or the other element of the faith; but none of these will do instead of the faith. We must have the faith, the whole faith, and nothing but the faith, and earnestly contend for that.

**The words "of God" are not in the Greek text.*

The man who denies that there is life in Christ for the world has no adequate evidence that there is life in Christ for himself. One says, I am one of the "predestinated," or one of the "elected," and therefore believe that there is life in Christ for me. But it requires as much evidence to prove that he is either elected or

predestinated as that there is life in Christ for him; and where is that evidence? Another says: The holy Spirit in my heart tells me that there is life in Christ for me. But it requires as much evidence to prove that the holy Spirit says anything in any man's heart differing from what he says in his Word as that there is life in Christ for him; and where is that evidence? And another quite triumphantly quotes the words – "Whosoever believeth," and says, I believe, and therefore there is life in Christ for me. But faith is not the basis of testimony, it is testimony that is the basis of faith. Without testimony, what is called faith is mere credulity; and without adequate testimony there is no genuine faith. Here all men are on one level. No man has had a revelation to himself and for himself alone. Every man has to believe the testimony which is intended for all, or be without faith, because there is no other. This is a vital point for every man and for every mission. It is quite right to discredit all unscriptural theology, but let us see that it is replaced only by what is sound and defensible. The life, the light, the love, and judgment of God are all links of one chain, and pertain to the same individuals. Drop out **[R1329 : page 138]** any one link of the chain and the others become useless and misleading.

The mere assent to the truthfulness of even all the elements of the faith is not enough. We may advocate the life of God in Christ, and the judgment of God in Christ, while we remain as selfish as sin and as hard as nether millstones. To have unfeigned faith in Christ is to trust him, adhere to him, and be faithful and steadfast in conforming to him. Our perception of the love of God must lead to appreciation, our appreciation to reciprocation, and our reciprocation must never come to an end. This is particularly emphasized by our blessed Lord. He says, "This is the judgment, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in

God." Here "evil" is the opposition of "truth." He "that doeth evil" is the opposite of he "that doeth truth." He who doeth evil has been begotten of the evil one, and he who doeth the truth has been begotten of the True One. He who has been begotten of the evil one loveth the darkness and hateth the light, and he who has been begotten of the True One loveth the light and hateth the darkness. He who loves the darkness remains in the darkness, and he who loves the light comes to the light. And he who remains in the darkness manifests that his deeds are wrought in Satan, while he who comes to the light manifests that his deeds "are wrought in God." Whenever and wherever God is manifested in the life, the light, and the love of Christ, men are being tested, tried, or proved, and ultimately they either reject or reciprocate the love of God. Those who reject the love of God cannot continue to live; and to those who reciprocate the love of God, the ratio of their reciprocation will always be the extent of their salvation.

Some say, The love of God is omnipotent, and therefore all men will ultimately become pure and good. Were the writer to say, This talk about "omnipotent love" is omnipotent nonsense, the reader might say, and very truly, That is meaningless. Well, there is no more omnipotent love than there is omnipotent nonsense, there being neither the one nor the other. Love is a moral force, and no moral force can be omnipotent. Divine love, though it "passeth knowledge" in "breadth, and length, and depth, and height," is to man no force whatever until it is perceived; and its force is, and always will be, in the ratio of his perception, appreciation, and reciprocation. Man can no more be forced to love anything, or any being, than he can be forced to be free. Everyone will ultimately have an adequate opportunity of partaking of "the water of life freely," and every one who will not partake "shall be destroyed from among the people."

Many admit that all who are "on the earth," at one time or another, will be offered the life that is in Christ, and deny that those

who are "under the earth" will ever have an offer of it. That position is utterly untenable. Christ was sent into the world "that the world through him might be saved." Those who were on the earth when those precious words were uttered were not the world, they were a part of it – a small part. Those who were under the earth at that time were not the world, they were a part of it – a large part. Those who are on the earth now are not the world, they are another part of it – comparatively, a smaller part. And those who are under the earth now are not the world; they are another part of it – comparatively a larger part. So has it been ever since these words were uttered. The part which is on the earth at one time becomes a part of the part which is under the earth at another time; and so will it continue to be until all are raised from the dead. But no one can rationally affirm that any part of the world is the whole world. It requires all the parts to make up the whole, whether on the earth or under it; and as sure as Christ is "the life of the world," so sure is it that every individual will have an offer of life. Death itself cannot be any insuperable barrier in the way of this being accomplished: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath age-lasting life, and shall not come into [R1329 : page 139] judgment, but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming* when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live."

*Sinaitic MS. omits the words "*and now is.*"

[R1330 : page 139] "Marvel not at this, for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of judgment." (John 5:24,25,28,29.) The revisers having made a clean sweep of the word "damnation," some are quite busy trying to read the word "condemnation" into this glorious passage, as though it were the equivalent of the word "judgment." Condemnation is no more the

equivalent of judgment than damnation is. The process of judgment will result either in justification or in condemnation, according to the merits or demerits of each case. The testimony which is necessary for the faith of those who are on the earth is necessary also for the faith of those who are under the earth; and as that testimony is being presented to some now, so will it, "in due time," be presented to all; and whether they are at present on the earth or under the earth cannot be permitted to interfere with God's gracious purpose.

Others are ridiculing the idea of "*post mortem* salvation." "They know not what they do." Do they not teach the resurrection of the dead? If they do, they are ridiculing their own position, because that is certainly *post mortem*. The fact is this: Salvation, according to the Scriptures, and Resurrection, according to the Scriptures, are substantially one and the same thing. Tell me in what sense and to what extent you are being saved, and I will tell you in what sense and to what extent you are being raised from the dead. During the present age the moral element of salvation is coming first; so is it with resurrection. During the future age the physical element of resurrection will come first; so will it be with salvation. But the order in which their various elements will be fully realized makes no essential difference in either salvation or resurrection; because every element will have to be fully realized before there can be complete resurrection or complete salvation.

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

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