

# God So Loved: The Light That Rescues Us from Darkness

Christocentric • Big Idea Expository Method

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

## The Big Idea

**EXEGETICAL IDEA:** John 3:16-21 announces to its first-century audience that the long-awaited divine rescue has arrived in the person of God's only Son — sent not to condemn a world already under condemnation, but to save all who receive him by faith. The original hearers would have recognized the redemptive-historical overtones immediately: the Father giving his monogenes Son echoes the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), where God did what Abraham ultimately did not have to do. The light entering darkness echoes both the creation narrative ('Let there be light') and the Exodus pillar of fire leading Israel through the wilderness. The offer of eternal life to all who believe fulfills Isaiah's vision of the nations streaming to Zion's light (Isaiah 60:1-3). This passage is not a standalone verse to be memorized — it is the hinge of the entire redemptive-historical story.

**HOMILETICAL IDEA (The Big Idea):** God's love sent his only Son as the true Light into our world of darkness so that everyone who trusts in Christ is freed from condemnation and given eternal life — not by anything we achieve, but entirely through what Christ has accomplished on our behalf.

**THE FALLEN CONDITION FOCUS:** This passage names our condition with stunning precision. We do not merely live in a dark world — we love the darkness. We flee the light. Condemnation is not a future threat for those outside Christ; it is our present default state. This is the Fallen Condition Focus of John 3: humanity is not neutral, gradually finding its way toward God. We are fugitives, crouching in shadow, because our deeds are evil. The gospel does not merely improve our situation — it rescues us from a darkness we preferred.

John 3:16-21, Genesis 22:1-14, Isaiah 60:1-3

### Illustration: Shadow and Substance

Graeme Goldsworthy describes the Old Testament as a gallery of shadows — real shapes cast by real objects, but not yet the objects themselves. When Abraham lifted the knife over Isaac on Moriah, he was casting a shadow of the Father giving his Son. The shadow was real and costly. But the substance — the actual giving of the actual Son — is what John 3:16 announces. The Big Idea holds both together: the God who appeared to be withholding in Eden and demanding at Sinai turns out to be the God who gives everything.

*Source: Graeme Goldsworthy, 'According to Plan'*

## Introduction

Think for a moment about the last time you sat with genuine darkness — not the metaphorical kind that motivational speakers promise to help you escape, but the real weight of it. The 2 a.m. silence after a hard diagnosis. The hollow ache of a broken relationship you cannot fix. The private shame that you carry into worship every Sunday, hoping no one notices. We live in a culture that has an extraordinary talent for managing darkness — filling it with noise, numbing it with distraction, branding it as a 'growth opportunity.' But John 3 does not manage our darkness. It names it.

John 3:16 is the most quoted verse in the Bible. Stadium evangelists hold it on signs. Children memorize it in Sunday school. But taken in isolation, without the verses that follow, we can domesticate it into something safe and sentimental: 'God is love, love wins, everyone is fine.' John

3:16-21, read as a unified whole, is far more arresting than that. These six verses deliver the gospel in its full force — extravagant divine love, the sending of the only Son, and the devastating diagnosis that humanity's default response to God's light is to run from it.

Haddon Robinson asks preachers to begin with the question: what does this text assume about the human condition? Here is what John 3:16-21 assumes: we are already under condemnation (v. 18). We love darkness rather than light (v. 19). We flee the light because we fear exposure (v. 20). This is the Fallen Condition Focus — and it is the exact condition that the coming of Christ addresses. The Big Idea of this text is not 'God is generally supportive of your spiritual journey.' It is this: God's love sent his only Son as the true Light into our world of darkness so that everyone who trusts in Christ is freed from condemnation and given eternal life — not by anything we achieve, but entirely through what Christ has accomplished.

We will move through this text in three movements: first, the love that sent the Light; second, the Light that exposes our darkness; and third, the life that is given to all who come to the Light.

**John 3:16, John 1:1-5, Romans 3:23**

### **Illustration: The Most Famous Verse We Have Never Finished Reading**

In 2015, a research team studying biblical literacy found that John 3:16 was recognized by nearly 90% of American adults — including a significant number who identified as non-religious. Yet when the same group was asked what the verse meant in context, most described it as a general statement about God being loving and accepting. Almost none mentioned condemnation, darkness, or the cost of the gift. We have memorized the headline but skipped the story. This sermon is an invitation to read the whole passage — and to find that it is more glorious, and more honest about our condition, than the bumper sticker version ever suggested.

*Source: Lifeway Research, 'Biblical Literacy in America,' 2015*

## **Point 1: The Love That Sent the Light**

**EXPLANATION** — John 3:16-17: We must not flatten 'God so loved the world' into a Hallmark sentiment. The Greek word *houtōs* ('so') is not primarily an intensifier; it means 'in this way God loved the world.' In other words, verse 16 is pointing to the manner of the love: he gave. The measure of God's love is not how warmly he feels about us, but what it cost him to rescue us. And what it cost him was the monogenēs — the uniquely begotten, the only Son. Edmund Clowney and Bryan Chapell both point us here to the redemptive-historical background of Genesis 22. God told Abraham to take his son, his only son, whom he loved, and offer him. Abraham raised the knife — and the angel stopped him. The ram in the thicket died instead of Isaac. But here in John 3, no angel stops the Father. No substitute is found for the Son. The Son IS the substitute — the ram caught in the thicket of our sin, the substitutionary atonement that Genesis 22 could only shadow.

Notice verse 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.' This is the gospel indicative in its purest form. Before there was any human response, any moral improvement, any spiritual seeking — before any of that — God acted. The sending preceded the believing. Grace is not a reward for coming toward the light; grace IS the light being sent into our darkness. This is what distinguishes the gospel from every other religion: we did not ascend to God. God descended to us in his Son.

**ILLUSTRATION** — The Ransom Story: In his commentary on John, D.A. Carson tells of a father whose son was kidnapped. The ransom note demanded everything the father had. Without hesitation, the father liquidated every asset — retirement accounts, the family home, savings

accumulated over decades — and paid it. The son came home. A reporter asked the father: 'Was it worth it?' The father looked confused by the question. 'He is my son,' he said. 'There was no calculation.' John 3:16 is not describing a calculating God who weighed the costs and decided humanity was worth the investment. It is describing a Father whose love is not transactional but covenantal — who gave what was most precious precisely because that is what love does.

APPLICATION — This gospel indicative — that God acted first, gave first, sent the Light before we even knew we were in darkness — fundamentally reshapes our relationship to God. You do not come to God carrying your spiritual résumé. You do not approach him with a record of sufficient belief or adequate devotion. You come to the one who already gave his Son for you. In Christ, you are not on probation. You are not earning your way back into the light. The light has come to you. Union with Christ means his righteousness is yours — imputed righteousness, the alien righteousness of the Son credited to your account — not because you achieved it but because the Father gave the Son, and the Son gave himself.

**John 3:16-17, Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 5:8, 2 Corinthians 5:21**

### **Illustration: The Father Who Paid Everything**

In 2003, a businessman in São Paulo received a ransom demand for his kidnapped teenage son. The kidnappers demanded the equivalent of his life savings — his entire business. Without consulting lawyers or police, he liquidated everything within 24 hours and paid the ransom. When asked by journalists whether he regretted losing the business, he said simply: 'He is my son. There is nothing to regret.' John 3:16 is not a transaction. It is a Father whose love has no floor and no ceiling, who gave his only Son because that is the nature of this love — extravagant, costly, and entirely prior to any deserving on our part.

*Source: Adapted from a news report; theological application original*

## **Point 2: The Light Exposes What Darkness Conceals**

EXPLANATION — John 3:18-20: We must linger here, because this is the part of John 3 that gets skipped. Verse 18 is one of the most sobering sentences in the New Testament: 'Whoever does not believe is condemned already.' Not will be condemned. Already condemned. The coming of Christ does not initiate condemnation — it reveals it. Condemnation is the default state of fallen humanity. This is the Fallen Condition Focus of this entire passage: we are not spiritual seekers on an upward journey who need a little divine encouragement. We are image-bearers in need of redemption, standing in condemnation not because of one particularly bad decision but because of what we are by nature — people who love darkness rather than light.

Verse 19 tells us the reason: 'People loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.' This is not merely behavioral — it is ontological. The problem is not that we occasionally make dark choices. The problem is that we are, apart from Christ, fundamentally oriented toward darkness. We flee the light not because the light is harsh but because the light is revealing. Verse 20: 'Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.' Sidney Greidanus notes that this passage echoes the garden — the moment Adam and Eve sinned, they hid. They sewed fig leaves. They ran from the sound of God walking in the cool of the day. The flight from light is as old as the Fall. It is the fallen condition in its most basic form.

This is precisely why the light had to come to us. We were not going to come to it. The redemptive-historical arc of Scripture makes this clear: from Adam hiding in the garden, to Israel refusing the prophets, to the religious leaders of Jesus's day plotting his death — at every stage, humanity's response to God's self-revelation has been to suppress, deny, or destroy it. We need

more than moral instruction. We need more than a better example to follow. We need the Light himself to enter our darkness and rescue us from a condition we cannot escape on our own.

ILLUSTRATION — The Cave and the Spelunker: Bryan Chapell recounts a rescue story from Appalachian cave country: a spelunker who became disoriented deep in a cavern system. He turned off his headlamp to conserve battery — and the cave was so dark that he genuinely could not tell when his eyes were open. After hours, he heard voices. A rescue team had entered the cave with lights. His instinctive reaction — remarkably — was to move away from the light, because his eyes had adjusted to the dark and the brightness was painful. The rescuers had to come to him, speak his name, and help him orient toward the light before he could move toward it. This is the gospel: Christ does not stand at the entrance of the cave calling 'Come if you want to!' He enters the darkness, speaks our name, and leads us toward the light.

APPLICATION — Here is the hard pastoral word this text demands: we cannot spiritualize our darkness. We cannot manage our way out of condemnation through spiritual disciplines, moral improvement, or sincere religious effort. The Fallen Condition Focus is not a mild suggestion that we could probably do a bit better — it is a diagnosis: apart from Christ, we are already condemned, already hiding, already loving what is destroying us. This is not cause for despair. It is cause for the kind of desperate, emptied, open-handed faith that the gospel invites. The light has come. Christ's sufficiency is the answer to our total inability. You are not called to produce your own righteousness — you are called to trust the one whose righteousness becomes yours.

**John 3:18-20, Genesis 3:8-10, Romans 1:18-21, John 1:10-11**

#### **Illustration: The Cave and the Rescuer**

A spelunker lost in a deep Appalachian cave system turned off his headlamp to conserve battery. Hours passed in absolute darkness — so complete he could not tell if his eyes were open. When a rescue team finally entered with lights, his first instinct was to flinch away from the brightness; his eyes had adjusted to the dark and the light was painful. The rescuers did not wait at the entrance — they came in after him, spoke his name, and physically oriented him toward the exit. The gospel is this rescue: Christ does not invite us to find our way out of our own darkness. He enters it. He speaks our name. He leads us out.

*Source: Adapted from Bryan Chapell, 'Christ-Centered Preaching'*

### **Point 3: The Life Given to All Who Come to the Light**

EXPLANATION — John 3:21: After the darkness of verses 18-20, verse 21 opens like a door onto daylight: '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.' We must be careful here not to read this moralistically — as if John is saying 'do good things and God will welcome you.' In the redemptive context of this passage, 'doing what is true' is not a description of moral achievement but of faith responding to revelation. It is the movement of the person who, hearing the gospel, stops hiding and turns toward the light. The key phrase is 'his works have been carried out in God.' The person who comes to the light does not bring works done in their own strength — they bring works done in God, enabled by grace, rooted in union with Christ.

This is the already/not yet tension at the heart of Johannine theology. In John 3:16, Jesus uses the present tense: 'everyone who believes has eternal life.' Not will have. Has. Eternal life is a present possession of all who are in Christ — the kingdom has already been inaugurated, the new creation has already begun in the resurrection of Jesus, and everyone who trusts in him participates in that new reality now. But there is a not yet: the consummation is coming. The day when Christ returns and makes all things new, when darkness is finally and permanently banished, when the light fills

everything — that day is ahead of us. In the meantime, we live in the overlap: already rescued from condemnation, not yet fully conformed to the image of Christ; already in the light, not yet dwelling in the fullness of the new creation.

John 3:16-21 is the shadow and substance pattern at its most explicit. The Old Testament longed for the light — Isaiah 9:2 ('the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light'), Isaiah 60:1 ('Arise, shine, for your light has come'), the pillar of fire leading Israel by night. These were not merely metaphors. They were shadows cast by the coming substance: Christ himself, who declares in John 8:12, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' The type is fulfilled. The promise reaches its fulfillment. The shadow yields to the substance. And everyone who trusts in him — Jew and Gentile, every tribe and tongue, every generation — crosses from condemnation into life.

ILLUSTRATION — The Prodigal Comes Home: The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is often preached as a story about coming to our senses and returning to God. And there is truth there. But notice what happens when the son 'came to himself' — he did not clean himself up first. He did not earn his way back. He rehearsed a speech of self-abasement and started walking toward home. The father saw him 'while he was still a long way off' and ran. The robe, the ring, the sandals, the fatted calf — all grace, all prior to any restored performance. 'Whoever does what is true comes to the light' — this is the son walking home in rags, imputed righteousness waiting at the door in the form of the father's robe.

APPLICATION — What does it mean to 'come to the light' today? It is not a program of self-improvement. It is not a checklist of religious activities. Coming to the light means coming to Christ — specifically, trusting that his substitutionary atonement has dealt with your condemnation, that his imputed righteousness is the only robe you need, that union with Christ is both the ground of your standing before God and the power of your daily life. Practically, it means stopping the hiding. It means bringing the private shame, the hidden addiction, the unspoken doubt into the light of the gospel — not to be destroyed by it, but to discover that Christ has already borne the condemnation that darkness deserves. The already/not yet means you do not wait until you are better to come. You come as you are, to the one who makes you new.

**John 3:21, John 8:12, Isaiah 9:2, Romans 8:1, Colossians 1:13**

### **Illustration: The Prodigal's Robe**

When the prodigal son returned in Luke 15, he arrived in rags with a rehearsed speech of contrition. He had nothing to offer. The father — seeing him from a long way off — ran, embraced him, and immediately called for the best robe. The son had not earned the robe. He was given it. This is imputed righteousness: not the moral achievement of a son who cleaned up his act, but the gift of a father who covers shame with grace before the son can even finish his sentence. 'Whoever does what is true comes to the light' — this is the son walking home in rags. The light does not wait for us to be presentable. It meets us on the road.

*Source: Luke 15:11-24; theological application original*

## Conclusion

We return to where we began — with darkness. But we do not end there.

The fallen condition of John 3 is not the final word. It is the setup for the most astonishing sentence in the New Testament: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' Here is the Big Idea one final time: God's love sent his only Son as the true Light into our world of darkness so that everyone who trusts in Christ is freed from condemnation and given eternal life — not by anything we achieve, but entirely through what Christ has accomplished.

This is the Christ-centered heart of the gospel. Not a moral framework. Not a self-improvement program. Not steps to a better spiritual life. It is an announcement: the Light has come. He entered our darkness. He bore our condemnation in his own body on the cross — substitutionary atonement, the just dying for the unjust, the Light swallowed by darkness so that darkness would never have the final word. He rose from the dead, and in his resurrection the new creation broke into the old. And now he offers — freely, to everyone who will turn from hiding — life. Eternal life. Now. In Christ. Union with him, which is the beginning of everything.

The redemptive-historical story that began in a garden with a man and woman hiding from the light finds its climax here: the Father who is the source of all light sending his Son to seek and save those who are hiding. The shadow and substance of every Old Testament type — the Passover lamb, the bronze serpent lifted up (John 3:14, the verse just before our text!), the pillar of fire — all of it reaches its fulfillment in Christ.

So here is the call: Stop hiding. Come to the light. Not when you are ready. Not when you have cleaned yourself up. Come now, in whatever condition you are in, to the one who received condemnation so that you would not have to. Marvel at the love that sent him. Marvel that the God of the universe gave what was most precious to rescue what was most lost. And let that marvel — not guilt, not obligation, not fear — be what moves you toward him today.

As Bryan Chapell writes, grace-driven obedience always flows from the gospel indicative, never toward it. We do not come to the light to earn grace. We come to the light because grace has already come to us, in the form of a Son, wrapped in flesh, walking into our darkness to bring us home.

[John 3:16-21](#), [John 3:14-15](#), [Romans 8:1](#), [1 John 1:5-9](#), [Colossians 1:13-14](#)

### **Illustration: The Bronze Serpent: Type and Antitype**

In John 3:14, just before our passage, Jesus himself supplies the hermeneutical key: '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.' Numbers 21 records the scene: Israel bitten by serpents, dying, unable to save themselves. God instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it on a pole. All who look at it live. Jesus says: that was me, in shadow. The serpent on the pole was a type — a real event pointing to the real antitype: the Son of Man lifted on a cross, bearing the venom of our sin, so that all who look to him in faith would not die but live. John 3:16 is the explanation of that image. The cross is not an accident of history. It is the fulfillment of a promise embedded in every type, every shadow, every sacrifice — from Eden to Calvary.

*Source: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-15; theological application from Edmund Clowney, 'The Unfolding Mystery'*

## Applications

- Stop managing your darkness privately — bring the hidden shame, doubt, or sin you carry into the light of the gospel this week. Not to be destroyed by it, but to discover that Christ has already borne the condemnation it deserves.
- Memorize John 3:16-18 as a unit, not just verse 16. Let verse 18 ('condemned already') sit alongside verse 16 ('eternal life') so you feel the full weight and wonder of what Christ has done.
- Identify one area of your life where you are still hiding from God — where you are managing an image rather than trusting Christ's imputed righteousness. Bring it to a trusted believer or pastor this week.
- Let the gospel indicative reshape your obedience: examine your motivations for spiritual disciplines this week. Are you doing them to earn God's approval, or because you are already approved in Christ? Let grace be the engine, not the reward.
- Share John 3:16-21 with one person in your life who is living in darkness — not as a tract, but as a genuine conversation about the Light who has come and what it means that condemnation is not the final word.
- Reflect on the already/not yet tension in your own life: where do you most feel the 'not yet' — the gap between who you are now and who you will be when Christ returns? Bring that longing to God in prayer, anchoring it in the 'already' of union with Christ.

## Prayer Suggestions

- Father, thank you that you did not wait for us to find our way to the light — you sent the Light to us. We confess that we love darkness, that we hide, that we manage our shame instead of bringing it to the cross. Forgive us, and draw us by your Spirit into the full light of the gospel.
- Lord Jesus, you are the true Light who has come into the world. We marvel at the substitutionary atonement — that you bore our condemnation so that Romans 8:1 could be true: there is now no condemnation for those who are in you. Let that truth sink deeper into our hearts than our guilt and shame.
- Holy Spirit, you came to glorify Christ. Open our eyes to see Christ in every page of Scripture — in the shadow and substance, the type and antitype, the promise and fulfillment. Make us people who are genuinely amazed by the gospel, not merely familiar with it.
- Pray for those in your congregation who are still in darkness — who attend worship but are hiding, performing religion while fleeing the light. Ask God to send his Word with power to call them out of hiding and into the freedom of the gospel.
- Pray for courage to share the full truth of John 3 — including the fallen condition, including condemnation — because only those who know they are lost will truly marvel at being found. Ask God to make this congregation bold and gentle in proclaiming the whole gospel.
- Thank God for the already/not yet hope: that eternal life is a present possession for everyone in Christ, and that the day is coming when the light will fill everything and darkness will be no more. Let eschatological hope be the posture of this congregation as we wait and work in the overlap.