

So God Loved: Grace, Light, and the Last Days in God's Prophetic Plan

Dispensational • Three-Point Sermon

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Introduction

John 3:16 may be the most memorized verse in all of Scripture — recited on banners at football games, painted on signs, whispered in hospital rooms. Yet most believers stop there, as though Jesus stopped there. He did not. In this nighttime conversation with Nicodemus — a ruler of Israel, a teacher who knew the covenant promises and longed for the coming Messiah — Jesus unveils a three-part revelation that cuts to the very heart of God's unfolding prophetic plan for humanity.

This text is not merely a personal salvation tract, though it is certainly that. It is a window into God's prophetic timeline — from His eternal love before the foundation of the world, through the present Church Age of grace, to the coming darkness of the last days and the urgency that demands our response right now. We are living in end times, and this passage speaks with piercing clarity to the moment we occupy in God's program.

Charles Ryrie, in his foundational work on dispensationalism, reminded a generation of pastors that rightly dividing the word of truth is not mere academic exercise — it is the responsible stewardship of God's revelation. John 3:16-21 rewards exactly this kind of careful, literal interpretation. Today we will discover three great truths: The Love That Launched a Dispensation, The Light That Divides — connecting God's plan for Israel and the Church, and The Darkness Deepening — calling us to urgent living in the last days. Let us open our Bibles together.

John 3:16-21, 2 Timothy 2:15

Illustration: The Letter That Unlocks Everything

Imagine receiving a letter that contains a single sentence you have read a thousand times, but you have never read the rest of the letter. When you finally turn the page, you discover the sentence is not merely a personal note — it is the opening line of a master plan that spans generations. John 3:16 is that opening sentence. Verses 17-21 turn the page. What we find there is not a footnote — it is a map of where God's prophetic program is headed and exactly where we stand on that map today.

Source: Original illustration

Point 1 — The Love That Launched a Dispensation: God's Gift of Grace

The opening word of verse 16 — 'For' — anchors what Jesus is about to say to His previous words about the bronze serpent Moses lifted up in the wilderness (verses 14-15). That Old Testament event was itself a dispensational marker: under the Mosaic dispensation, dying Israelites looked in faith at the lifted serpent and lived. Now, in the fullness of time — at the transition into what we rightly call the dispensation of grace, the Church Age — God does something infinitely greater. He gives His only begotten Son. The pattern is consistent with God's method of literal fulfillment: just as Israel looked and lived in the wilderness, so now the world looks to the crucified and risen Christ and is saved. Fulfilled prophecy establishes the hermeneutical pattern for unfulfilled prophecy.

The word 'world' — kosmos — is deliberately inclusive. God's love reaches across every dispensational boundary, embracing both Jew and Gentile in this present age. But we must be careful here, because this inclusive love does not mean God has abandoned His unconditional covenant promises to national Israel. The Abrahamic Covenant and the Davidic Covenant are not

absorbed into the Church. They remain eternal and unconditional, awaiting literal fulfillment when God resumes His prophetic program with Israel after the pretribulational rapture of the Church. God loves the world through the gospel of grace AND He loves Israel through His unbreakable covenant faithfulness. Both are simultaneously true. Rightly dividing the word requires us to hold both truths without collapsing one into the other.

Verse 17 is the hinge: God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. This captures the spirit of the present dispensation — the Church Age is a season of extended grace, a parenthesis in God's larger prophetic program during which the gospel goes to all nations and the body of Christ is being gathered. As Peter writes, the Lord is 'not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9). This window of grace, however, will not remain open indefinitely. The imminent return of Christ — the blessed hope, the catching away of the Church — marks the close of this age. The pretribulational rapture is not a theological curiosity; it is the next event on God's prophetic calendar, and it could occur before this service ends.

Application: Have you personally received this gift of grace that launched the current dispensation? Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone — not by works, not by sacrament, not by religious heritage. And for those who have believed: eternal security is grounded not in our faithfulness but in His. The one who gave His Son will not take back the gift.

John 3:16-17, Numbers 21:8-9, Genesis 12:1-3, 2 Samuel 7:12-16, 2 Peter 3:9, Romans 11:1-2

Illustration: The Deed That Cannot Be Revoked

When a parent places an inheritance in an irrevocable trust for a child, no future event — not the child's failures, not changes in law, not the parent's later regrets — can nullify that trust. It is unconditional by design. Dispensational theology sees God's covenant promises to Israel exactly this way. The Abrahamic Covenant, cut in Genesis 15 while Abram slept and could not even participate, was God binding Himself unconditionally to His promises. John MacArthur has noted that this covenant structure is precisely why Paul can say in Romans 11 that 'the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.' The same grace that saves us individually is the same covenant faithfulness that guarantees God's prophetic program for Israel will be completed on schedule.

Source: John MacArthur, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 9-16; Genesis 15 covenant structure

Point 2 — The Light That Divides: God's Plan for Israel, the Church, and Coming Judgment

Verse 18 introduces a truth that is both glorious and sobering: belief and condemnation are not symmetrical outcomes weighted equally in God's design. The one who believes is not judged — they have already passed from death to life, justified by grace through faith, secure in Christ. But the one who does not believe is already condemned — not eventually, but presently — because they have not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is not divine cruelty; it is the moral logic of a universe in which the Light of the world has been publicly offered and publicly rejected.

John MacArthur, in his commentary on this passage, observes that condemnation is not something God imposes from outside — it is something humanity courts by refusing the Light sent for its salvation. 'This is the judgment,' verse 19 states, 'that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.' The first coming of Christ — His incarnation, public ministry, crucifixion, and bodily resurrection — is prophetic fulfillment in the most literal sense. Micah 5:2 specified Bethlehem. Isaiah 7:14 specified the virgin birth. Zechariah 9:9 specified the triumphal entry. Zechariah 11:12-13 specified the thirty pieces of silver. Every single prophecy of His first coming was fulfilled with literal, historical precision. This is the hermeneutical

foundation for all dispensational interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy: if the first coming prophecies were fulfilled literally, the Second Coming prophecies will be fulfilled with equal literalness — the Tribulation, Daniel's 70th week, the Millennial Kingdom, and the eternal state.

This is precisely where the Israel-Church distinction becomes prophetically critical. Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus as a representative of covenant Israel — the people who possessed the Law, the prophets, the promises, and who were now standing face to face with the Light of the world. Israel's national rejection of that Light at the crucifixion did not void God's covenant promises. Paul is unambiguous in Romans 9-11: God has not rejected His people. The partial hardening of Israel during this Church Age is purposeful — it is the means through which the fullness of the Gentiles is brought in. The Church, composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers, is a distinct entity that began at Pentecost and was not foreseen in the Old Testament economy. When the Church is raptured — caught away in the blessed hope — God will resume His direct program with national Israel through the seven years of Daniel's 70th week. The 144,000 Jewish evangelists will be sealed. A faithful remnant will emerge. And at the close of the Tribulation, all Israel will be saved, as the prophets declared.

Application: The light still shines in this present hour of grace. If you are outside of Christ, this is the appointed time — not after the rapture, not during the Tribulation, but now, while the door of grace stands open. If you are a believer, you bear the light in a dividing world. Every person in your neighborhood, your workplace, your family who does not know Christ stands under the condemnation of verse 18. That reality should shape how urgently and how often you share the gospel.

[John 3:18-19](#), [Micah 5:2](#), [Isaiah 7:14](#), [Zechariah 9:9](#), [Zechariah 11:12-13](#), [Romans 9:1-5](#), [Romans 11:1-2](#), [Romans 11:25-27](#), [Daniel 9:24-27](#)

Illustration: Israel 1948 — The Super-Sign of the Prophetic Timeline

David Jeremiah has often described the rebirth of the nation of Israel on May 14, 1948 as the most significant prophetic fulfillment in the modern era — the 'super-sign' that sets the stage for every other end-times event. For nineteen centuries, the existence of a national Israel was unthinkable. Scholars who held to a literal interpretation of God's covenant promises to Abraham and David were mocked. Then in a single day — Isaiah 66:8 asks rhetorically, 'Can a nation be born in a day?' — the impossible happened. Israel was reborn. The fig tree, which Jesus used as a sign of Israel's national restoration in Matthew 24:32-34, put forth its leaves. The Light rejected at the cross will one day be received by a repentant national Israel when they look on Him whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10). The literal interpretation of prophecy has been validated before our eyes.

Source: David Jeremiah, The Book of Signs; Zechariah 12:10; Matthew 24:32-34

Point 3 — The Darkness Deepening: Living with Urgency in the Last Days

Verses 20-21 bring the passage to a conclusion that is both diagnostic and demanding. 'Everyone who does evil hates the Light and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.' This is not merely a description of two categories of individual response — it is a description of the spiritual atmosphere of the last days in which you and I are living right now.

Paul warned Timothy that in the last days, difficult times would come: men would be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, unholy, holding to a form of godliness while denying its power (2 Timothy 3:1-5). We are watching these signs of the times multiply with accelerating velocity. The love of darkness — the rejection of absolute truth, the celebration of what God calls evil, the

hostility toward the name of Jesus Christ in the public square — is not random cultural drift. It is the deepening darkness that the prophetic timeline predicts will characterize the final phase of the Church Age before the catching away. The Antichrist, who is coming in Daniel's 70th week, will be the ultimate embodiment of darkness masquerading as light — the great counterfeit who leads the world in its most catastrophic rejection of the true Light.

But hear the sharp contrast in verse 21: those who come to the Light 'practice the truth.' In responsible dispensational preaching, we always connect prophetic reality to practical holiness. Charles Ryrie consistently insisted that prophetic truth is not given merely to satisfy our curiosity about the future — it is given to transform the way we live today. John makes the connection explicit in his first epistle: 'Everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure' (1 John 3:3). The imminent return of Christ — the blessed hope of the Church, the pretribulational rapture — is not a date-setting exercise or a sensationalist chart. It is the most powerful motivator for holy, urgent, evangelistic living available to the believer. There is no prophetic sign that must precede the rapture. The next event on God's calendar may be the sound of the trumpet.

The prophetic timeline is not abstract theology. It presses a question to every person in this room: Are you practicing the truth or protecting the darkness? Are you walking in the light or are there areas of your life that you are deliberately shielding from God's exposure? And are you sharing the Light with urgency? Every person you know who does not know Christ will face the full darkness of the Tribulation if the rapture occurs before they believe. The signs of the times are not meant to produce fear in the believer — they are meant to produce fire: a burning urgency to live purely and to evangelize relentlessly.

Application: Identify one area of your life where you have been loving darkness over light — and bring it to confession and repentance today. Write down two people in your life who do not know Christ, and commit to a gospel conversation with each of them this week. The blessed hope is real. The pretribulational rapture is imminent. Live accordingly.

John 3:20-21, 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 1 John 3:2-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Revelation 6:1-2, Titus 2:13

Illustration: The Watchman Who Knew the Season

In the ancient world, a city watchman did not need to know the exact hour of the enemy's arrival — he needed to know the signs: the dust on the horizon, the sound of hoofbeats in the distance, the behavior of the birds. His job was not to announce a precise timetable but to sound the alarm with urgency when the signs were unmistakable. Responsible dispensational preaching is watchman preaching. We do not set dates — Scripture explicitly forbids it. But we do read the signs: Israel reborn, Jerusalem the center of world conflict, the globalization of commerce that makes a mark-of-the-beast economic system technologically feasible, the moral darkness Paul predicted for the last days visibly accelerating. We know the season. The watchman's job is not to calm the people — it is to rouse them to readiness.

Source: Original illustration, drawing from Ezekiel 33:1-9 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Conclusion — Live in Light of the Blessed Hope

We have walked together through three movements in God's unfolding prophetic plan, drawn from one of the most familiar passages in all of Scripture. First, we saw The Love That Launched a Dispensation — a God whose love is so vast that it anchored the entire Church Age in grace, offering salvation to all while maintaining His unconditional covenant promises to national Israel. Second, we saw The Light That Divides — the first coming of Christ as the supreme prophetic fulfillment that establishes the literal pattern for all that is still to come, and the sobering reality that rejection of that Light carries eternal consequence. Third, we saw The Darkness Deepening — the signs of the times multiplying around us exactly as Scripture predicted, calling every believer to urgency, holiness, and bold evangelism in these last days.

John 3:16-21 is not merely a personal salvation summary. In the hands of a Savior who understood precisely where He stood in God's prophetic timeline, it is a window into God's heart for the world, a map of the current dispensation, and an urgent call to live in light of what is coming. The Church Age, this extraordinary parenthesis in God's prophetic program, is drawing toward its close. The pretribulational rapture — the catching away that Paul described as the blessed hope in Titus 2:13 — is imminent. After that glorious event, Daniel's 70th week begins, the Antichrist rises to power, the Tribulation runs its seven-year course, and then — in the most spectacular, literal fulfillment of unfulfilled prophecy this world will ever witness — the Second Coming: Christ returning to earth, visibly, physically, unmistakably, every eye seeing Him, to establish His Millennial Kingdom with its capital in Jerusalem, sitting on David's throne, fulfilling every covenant promise made to Abraham and David, binding Satan, and reigning in righteousness for one thousand years.

This is where history is going. This is the prophetic timeline of God, rightly divided. And in this moment — in this Church Age, this dispensation of grace — you and I are stewards of the Light. John 3:16 is the headline. Verses 17-21 are the urgency. The window of grace is still open. Come to the Light. Walk in the Light. And share the Light — with every urgency that the last days demand. The next sound you hear may be a trumpet.

[John 3:16-21](#), [Titus 2:13](#), [1 Thessalonians 4:16-18](#), [Revelation 19:11-16](#), [Revelation 20:1-6](#), [2 Samuel 7:12-16](#), [Romans 11:26](#)

Illustration: The Last Lighthouse

A lighthouse keeper on a rocky coastline serves one purpose: to shine the light so that ships can find safe harbor before the storm. He does not choose which ships receive the warning. He does not calculate which captains deserve to see the beam. He simply keeps the light burning with everything he has, as long as he has it, because ships are in the water and the rocks are real and the storm is coming. We are those lighthouse keepers. John 3:16 is the light we have been entrusted with. The Tribulation — the storm of Daniel's 70th week — is coming. The rocks of condemnation described in verse 18 are real. The blessed hope of the rapture means our time at this post is not unlimited. Keep the light burning. Shine it on every soul within your reach. The harbor is real, the Light is true, and the night is far spent.

Source: Original illustration

Applications

- Examine your own standing before God: have you personally received the gift of grace described in John 3:16, trusting in Christ alone for salvation by faith alone?
- Identify one area of darkness in your life — a habit, a relationship, a thought pattern — that you have been protecting from God's light, and bring it to confession and repentance this week
- Write down the names of two people in your life who do not know Christ and commit to a gospel conversation with each of them within the next seven days, motivated by the urgency of the last days

- Study the dispensational framework of Scripture — consider reading Charles Ryrie's 'Dispensationalism' or John MacArthur's commentary on Daniel — to better understand the prophetic timeline and how to share it clearly
- Cultivate a daily awareness of the imminent return of Christ: each morning ask, 'How would I live today if the rapture were tonight?' Let that question shape your priorities, your relationships, and your evangelism
- Pray specifically for the peace of Jerusalem and for the salvation of Jewish people, understanding that God's unconditional covenant promises to national Israel will be fulfilled on His prophetic timeline
- Share the blessed hope with at least one believer this week who may be discouraged by the darkness they see around them — remind them that the signs of the times confirm we are exactly on schedule in God's prophetic plan

Prayer Suggestions

- Thank God for the specific love described in John 3:16 — that He gave, not loaned, His only Son — and for the grace of living in the Church Age where that gift is freely offered
- Confess any area of your life where you have loved darkness rather than light, asking for the courage to step into full transparency before God and others
- Pray for the unsaved people in your life by name, asking God to use you as a bearer of the Light before the window of grace closes for each of them
- Pray for national Israel — for the peace of Jerusalem, for Jewish people to recognize their Messiah, and for God's covenant faithfulness to be displayed in our generation
- Ask God to give you a watchman's awareness: eyes to see the signs of the times clearly, a heart that is stirred to urgency rather than paralyzed by fear, and lips ready to proclaim the gospel
- Pray for the Church universal — that believers in this last hour of the Church Age would live with the purity and evangelistic fire that the imminent return of Christ demands
- Close with a prayer of anticipation for the blessed hope — the pretribulational rapture — thanking God that the catching away is not a threat but a promise, and asking for grace to live every day in light of it