Loved Out of the Dark: Law, Gospel, and the Light of John 3

Lutheran • Four Pages Method

John 3:16-21 • Mixed congregation

Page 1: Trouble in the Text

John 3:16 is perhaps the most memorized verse in Christendom. Children recite it. Stadium signs proclaim it in end zones. Bumper stickers wear it with confidence. But preachers who stop at verse 16 are hiding from their congregations — and from themselves. Read on. Read what John actually says in the verses that follow: 'And this is the judgment' — verse 19. Not 'this might be the judgment' or 'this will be the judgment if you do not shape up.' This IS the judgment. Present tense. Already accomplished. 'The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.'

There it is. The Law has spoken, and it has spoken with devastating clarity. Before the Gospel can do its work, we must sit with this word. The world is not merely in danger of condemnation — John says the world 'is already condemned' (verse 18). The one who does not believe stands already under judgment. This is not potential doom hovering on the horizon; it is a present reality lodged in the chest. The old Adam, the self we drag around with us from birth, does not merely prefer darkness — it loves darkness. It clings to it. It has made darkness its dwelling place.

Notice what the text says about why we love darkness: 'because their deeds were evil' (verse 20). This is not a peripheral problem that education might fix, that therapy might resolve, or that stronger religious effort might overcome. The Lutheran Confessions are unflinching here — the bondage of the will means that the natural human heart cannot turn itself toward the light. We do not choose darkness over light in some moment of free deliberation, as though the will were an impartial judge surveying two equal options. We love darkness because it is what we are. The deeds are evil because the doer is corrupted at the root. As Martin Luther insisted against Erasmus in The Bondage of the Will, the human will in spiritual matters is not merely weakened — it is captive. It cannot free itself any more than a stone can make itself a bird.

And here is the deepest cut the text delivers: the very Light that could save us is the one we reject. Verse 20 — 'Everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.' We do not merely fail to find God through insufficient searching. We flee from him. We prefer the shadow precisely because the light would reveal what we are. The darkness is not merely outside us, a hostile environment we endure. We carry it within, and we are determined to keep it hidden. The Law must be allowed to say this without softening, without pastoral cushioning, before the Gospel can speak at all. The Law must kill before the Gospel can make alive.

John 3:17-20, John 1:5

> **Illustration: Luther on the Bound Will**
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> In The Bondage of the Will (1525), Luther wrote to Erasmus: 'Free will is a fiction, a name with no reality.' He compared the human will between God and Satan to a horse between two riders — it goes wherever the rider directs, and the fallen human will, left to itself, always carries its rider toward darkness. The horse does not choose its rider. This is not pessimism about human beings; it is the honest diagnosis the Law requires before the Gospel can be received as the gift it truly is.
>
> *Source: Martin Luther, De Servo Arbitrio (The Bondage of the Will), 1525*

Page 2: Trouble in Our World

The congregation does not need to imagine this darkness from a safe academic distance — it lives here, in this room, in these pews. Every person who has gathered this morning knows something about loving darkness. Perhaps it is the secret harbored for years — the failure in a marriage quietly buried, the addiction pursued in private with practiced skill, the resentment nursed steadily against a neighbor or a sibling or an old friend. Perhaps it is the digital darkness: what we watch when no one is looking, the conversations we carry on in the shadows of our devices, the way the smartphone has become a confessional that grants access without ever offering absolution.

But there is a subtler darkness that John 3 exposes, and it may be more dangerous precisely because it wears religious clothing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it cheap grace — the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, Baptism without its daily implications, the Lord's Supper received as mere routine rather than as the body and blood of Christ given for sinners. It is the darkness of the person who has attended worship for thirty years while believing, somewhere in the unexamined back rooms of the heart, that their attendance, their moral decency, their civic respectability is what makes them acceptable before God. That person has built an elaborate shelter in the darkness and decorated it with a cross.

The bondage of the will means we cannot diagnose our own condition with accuracy. We assess ourselves by comparison — I am not as bad as that person, I give to charity, I have never done anything truly terrible. The Law of God does not permit this arithmetic. 'Everyone who does wicked things hates the light' — there is no exception clause for the religiously respectable, no carve-out for the longtime member who knows all the liturgical responses. The old Adam in the pew is no more capable of coming into the light under his own power than the old Adam in the gutter. The Small Catechism teaches that we sin in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. The darkness is not a problem of degree that moral improvement might address; it is a condition of the will that only an act of God can break.

And notice — as the Law forces us to notice — that John's condemnation is not future. It is present. The person who does not believe 'is condemned already' (verse 18). We do not stand on the edge of a cliff, warned of a fall we might avoid if we act quickly. We have already fallen. This is what the full weight of Law and Gospel requires us to hear: not a warning about what could happen, but an honest word about what is. The trouble in John 3 is not a forecast. It is a diagnosis. And the patient cannot heal himself.

John 3:18-20, Romans 3:10-12

> **Illustration: Bonhoeffer on Cheap Grace as Darkness**
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> Dietrich Bonhoeffer opened The Cost of Discipleship with a diagnosis that cuts across every comfortable pew: 'Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, Baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.' He was describing a community that had chosen the comfortable darkness of religion over the exposing light of the Gospel. The German church of his era had made peace with the darkness by draping it in Christian language. The question John 3 asks is whether we have done the same.
>
> *Source: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 1937*

Page 3: Grace in the Text

Then comes verse 16. And after sitting with the full weight of what preceded it, it lands differently.

'For God so loved the world.' Not the world when it cleaned itself up. Not the world in its better moments, in its more admirable hours. The world that loves darkness. The world already standing under condemnation. The world whose will is bound and cannot turn itself. That world — this world — God loved. The Greek word here is agape, the love that moves toward the undeserving and gives itself away regardless of the response, the love that does not require the beloved to be lovely before it acts. This is the first and most stunning proclamation: God did not wait at the edge of darkness for the darkness to make itself light. God sent his Son into it.

'He gave his only Son.' This is the theology of the cross standing at the very center of the cosmos. God does not hover at a safe distance and call encouragingly toward us from across the void. God descends. The eternal Word takes on flesh — this is the incarnation, the central mystery of our faith, the mystery that the whole liturgical year rehearses and proclaims. And the flesh he takes on is precisely ours: the flesh marked by the old Adam's guilt, the flesh that loves darkness, the flesh already under condemnation. Jesus does not arrive in a form untouched by our condition; he enters it. At the cross, the one who is the Light becomes darkness for us — bearing our condemnation, absorbing the judgment that John 3:18 announces as already accomplished, exhausting in his own body the full sentence of the Law against us.

This is what Luther called the fröhliche Wechsel, the happy exchange: our sin is placed upon Christ; his alien righteousness is placed upon us. This is justification by faith alone — the article upon which the church stands or falls. It is not a declaration earned by our turning toward the light, not a reward for those who sought God with sufficient sincerity. It is a forensic declaration spoken over sinners by a God who has already accomplished the rescue. The Gospel of John 3 is not 'God will help you find the light if you sincerely seek it.' It is: the Light has come into the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5).

'That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' — and here faith is not a human achievement hauled up from the darkened will, not a decision we muster by our own determination. Faith is the gift of the Holy Spirit, created through the means of grace, through the external Word proclaimed by the Office of the Holy Ministry. This is why the Lutheran Confessions insist that the Spirit does not work apart from the Word — he binds himself to it, delivers himself through it. 'I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him,' the Small Catechism teaches — 'but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel.' Even the coming into the light is God's work. Verse 21 confirms it: the one who comes to the light does so because their deeds 'have been carried out in God.' The grace is total. The gift is unconditional. Pro nobis — for us — is the grammar of the Gospel.

John 3:16-17, John 3:21, John 1:5

> **Illustration: Luther's Happy Exchange**
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> Luther described the Gospel in his 1520 treatise The Freedom of a Christian: 'Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, Christ and the soul become one flesh. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage... then it follows that everything they have they hold in common. The gracious, righteous, holy Christ takes our sin, death, and damnation as his own — and gives us in return his life, righteousness, and salvation.' This is not a transaction in which we bring something to the exchange. We bring only the darkness. Christ brings everything. This is justification by faith alone, proclaimed as pure gift.
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> *Source: Martin Luther, The Freedom of a Christian, 1520*

Page 4: Grace in Our World

You were baptized. This is where the Gospel of John 3 lands in your actual life — not in some distant theological stratosphere, but in the specific, dated, water-and-Word event of your Baptism.

In Holy Baptism, the light of Christ was spoken over your darkness. You were claimed. You were named. The alien righteousness of Christ — which is the only righteousness that avails before God — was placed upon you as surely and as concretely as the water was placed upon your head. The Small Catechism teaches that Baptism 'works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this.' This is not ceremony. This is not symbol. This is the means of grace delivering, through water and the Word, exactly what it promises: the light of Christ into a life that loved darkness. Your baptismal identity is the foundation upon which everything else in your Christian life rests.

And now, as the Lutheran Confessions have always understood with clear-eyed realism, you live as simul justus et peccator — simultaneously saint and sinner, simultaneously fully righteous in Christ and fully aware of the old Adam still operating within you. The old Adam did not drown completely; he is a strong swimmer. He surfaces every morning, trying to drag you back to the dark corners you know too well. But daily dying and rising in Baptism means that every morning is also a return to the font, a small resurrection. Luther reportedly said that we should begin each day by making the sign of the cross and remembering: I am baptized. This is not nostalgia for a sacrament received years ago. It is the daily appropriation of the Gospel, the daily return to the light that God himself brought to you.

This is why confession and absolution is not a penitential burden but a gift. When you confess your darkness — not to inform God of something he did not know, but to receive what the Office of the Holy Ministry is authorized to deliver — and when the pastor speaks the words of absolution, it is the external Word of Christ arriving through a human voice to do what no inner voice can do for itself. And when you receive the Lord's Supper — the true body and blood of Christ present in, with, and under the bread and wine in the sacramental union — you are not receiving a symbol of a distant Savior. You are receiving the one who descended into the darkness for you, now present at this altar, for you, pro nobis, again.

Living in this light, you carry it into your vocation — into your work, your family, your neighborhood, your ordinary Tuesday. Not as a burden you must perform to deserve the light. Not as a spiritual ladder you must climb to maintain your standing before God. But as the spontaneous overflow of a life that has been set free. The baptized teacher, the baptized parent, the baptized plumber, the baptized retiree — all live in both kingdoms, serving their neighbor with the freedom that only the Gospel can produce. The world is still full of darkness. John 3 does not pretend otherwise. But the light has come into it, and the darkness has not overcome it, and you have been baptized into that light. The article upon which the church stands or falls is not merely a doctrinal position to be defended. It is the oxygen of daily life for people who were loved out of the dark.

John 3:16, Romans 6:3-4, 2 Corinthians 5:21

> **Illustration: Luther's Morning Blessing and the Daily Return to Baptism**
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> In the Small Catechism, Luther instructs every head of household to begin the morning by making the sign of the holy cross and saying: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.' He then directs: 'In the morning when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say: God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch over me. Amen.' For Luther, this daily ritual was not superstition — it was a deliberate return to Baptism, a daily act of dying and rising, a refusal to let the old Adam pretend that the Gospel was somehow yesterday's news. Gerhard Forde described this as the Christian

life lived entirely from the outside in — not ascending toward God by moral effort, but receiving daily from God the righteousness we could never produce ourselves.

Source: Martin Luther, Small Catechism, 1529; Gerhard Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross, 1997

Applications

• Examine the specific 'dark corners' in your own life — the private sins, the hidden resentments, the religious self-sufficiency — and bring them to confession and absolution this week, trusting that absolution is not a formality but the spoken word of Christ's forgiveness delivered through the Office of the Holy Ministry.
• Begin each morning with Luther's practice from the Small Catechism: make the sign of the cross, speak your baptismal name before God, and remember that your identity before God is not determined by the previous day's failures but by the alien righteousness of Christ given to you in Baptism.
• Receive the Lord's Supper with the confidence that you are receiving the true body and blood of Christ in the sacramental union — not as a reward for sufficient faith or moral progress, but as the means of grace through which God continues to deliver the Gospel to sinners who need it every week.
• In your vocation — your work, your family responsibilities, your community life — act not to earn God's favor but as one already freed by the Gospel. Ask: how does my baptismal identity shape how I serve my neighbor today in the kingdom of the left hand?
• Resist the temptation to soften either the Law or the Gospel in your own thinking: let the Law say what John 3:18-20 says (you are condemned already), and let the Gospel say what John 3:16-17 says (God loved you anyway and sent his Son into your darkness). The tension between them is not a problem to resolve — it is the heartbeat of Lutheran faith.

Prayer Suggestions

• Lord God, let your Law do its full work in us this day — expose the darkness we have loved, the sins we have hidden, the self-righteousness we have constructed. Do not let us escape into comfortable religion before the Law has finished its accusing work.
• Gracious Father, we thank you that you did not wait for us to find the light before you sent it. You loved the world that loves darkness. You gave your only Son for people who were already condemned. Receive our gratitude for a grace we did not seek and could not earn.
• Holy Spirit, you who work only through the means of grace — the external Word, Holy Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Absolution — create and sustain faith in us through these gifts. We cannot come to Christ by our own reason or strength; call us again through the Gospel this day.
• Lord Christ, you who are both the Light of the world and the one who bore our darkness at the cross — remind us of our baptismal identity when the old Adam rises. Let us live each day as those who are dying and rising with you, simul justus et peccator, held by your alien righteousness alone.
• Heavenly Father, as we go into the week in our various vocations, send us not as people earning your approval but as people already freed by the Gospel. Let our service to our neighbors flow from the grace we have received, not from fear of condemnation you have already absorbed for us in your Son. Amen.