

John 3

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[0 : 00] Now, as we look at this short passage this afternoon, I just want to ask one question, which is a question that a lot of people ask. It's the question that's on the front of your sheet this afternoon, and it's the question, if God is supposed to be a God of love, why does he let his son die?

If God is supposed to be a loving God, yet 2,000 years ago, a man the Bible claims was God's son, Jesus Christ, the exact representation of God himself as a human being, was killed.

And God let that happen. And I want us to see why those two things are joined together. How can God be a loving God and yet his son died?

Because it could be, couldn't it, that God is a loving God, but Jesus died a tragic death. That somehow the plan, whatever it was, went awfully wrong.

God is a loving God, but Jesus died. It was a tragic mistake. Or it could be that God is not at all loving. Jesus trusted God with all of his heart, but Jesus got killed.

[1 : 21] And God, his father, failed him. Because on the face of it, those two things don't seem to match at all, do they? If I allowed my three-year-old son to die, and I could have stopped it, you wouldn't think that I was a loving father at all, would you?

I would probably be arrested and put in prison. And that is sometimes what people think happened when Jesus Christ died on the cross. In a book that was written a few years ago, it's quite a while ago now, a writer caused a bit of a storm by suggesting that Jesus' death had a very sinister motive behind it.

This writer says that the way Christians have understood Jesus' death sounds like a form of cosmic child abuse. That God was a vengeful father, punishing his son for an offence he'd never committed.

If God is all-loving and all-powerful, then it's either a huge error, isn't it? Or God the Father really is a cosmic child abuser. But what sort of God reveals himself to us in the Bible?

I want to say to you this afternoon, it isn't God is loving, but Jesus died. It is, actually, God is loving, so Jesus is killed, Jesus dies.

[2 : 46] But I don't want you to just listen to my words, I want you to listen to Jesus' words. And we hear Jesus' words here, don't we, in John's Gospel. And in this passage, in John's book, John's eyewitness account of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, Jesus here is speaking to a local religious leader called Nicodemus.

And he is an expert on the Jewish religion. And in this conversation, Jesus tells Nicodemus about his mission, about the purpose of his life.

And strangely, Jesus turns the conversation to speak about his own death. If you look at verse 14 at the top there, Jesus says, As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

Now, in kind of Bible language, Jesus there is using an illustration, based on a story in the Old Testament. And he's using an illustration to describe his own death.

And so, first off, Jesus knowingly speaks here, doesn't he, about his death. That he must be lifted up on a cross. And so, his death is intentional.

[4 : 10] Jesus' death is planned. It's intentional. His death is not a blunder. It's not a failure in the plan. Oh, the result of God's vengefulness. Jesus himself speaks about it as something that he knows is going to happen.

And it's planned. And there is an intention behind it. Jesus knows that he has come to die. A little bit later on in John's Gospel, he records Jesus talking about himself like a shepherd.

In another famous passage. Looking after his people. And Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. Why? Because I lay my life down for my sheep.

No one takes my life from me, he says. But I lay it down. Jesus says, My purpose on this earth is to be a shepherd for my people.

And I am going to do that by dying. That is the plan. Jesus' death, it's intentional. In another Gospel, Luke's Gospel, it's another compilation of evidence about Jesus Christ.

[5 : 17] In Luke 9, Jesus says many, many times, The Son of Man must suffer. And be rejected and be killed. And on the third day rise.

You see, Jesus understood. This was his great mission in his life. Was his death. And all through the Gospel accounts, we read about Jesus being convinced about this.

About this mission. There are several moments where he could have easily avoided death, actually. Jesus didn't, for example, stay in the north part of Israel, up in Galilee, where he could have hid out in the country, couldn't he?

No, he resolutely goes to Jerusalem, where he knows all of the threat is. And when people give him the option to avoid death, he tells them off.

And he says, Don't. Don't. Don't. Don't think that way. No, he lays his own life down of his own accord. He's not a victim. Jesus' death was intended by Jesus himself.

[6 : 23] God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, plans his death together. It was a violent death, wasn't it? But it wasn't an abusive, unplanned death.

It was a voluntary death. God is loving, but Jesus died? No, it was intentional. But secondly, Jesus' death was a loving thing for the Father to allow.

It was a loving thing to do. Looking back at the passage in John's Gospel here, just notice the connection between Jesus' death and God's love.

It is probably one of the most famous verses in the Bible, isn't it? John 3, 16. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.

You see, love, not vengeance, not hate, not abuse, is the motivation for this plan.

[7 : 29] God so loved the world. I don't know if you've seen on Sky TV the Discovery Channel. It's a channel all about the world of nature.

And the Discovery Channel, they launched an ad a couple of years ago to kind of get people to sign up to there, to subscribe to their channel. And the tagline, the kind of phrase that they kept saying through this ad was, the world is just awesome, said.

And the advert kind of had images going across jungles and deserts and the kind of thing you can imagine on the Discovery Channel. And it had a song and it went like this.

I love the mountains, I love the clear blue skies, I love the oceans, I love the world, I love all of its sights and sounds, I love giant squids, I love it when the air is thin, I love the whole world, it's such a wonderful place.

It's a wonderful world, isn't it, according to Louis Armstrong. There is a lot to love about the world.

But the thing is, when we read this passage in John 3.16, we've kind of got Discovery Channel mode in our minds when we read that God so loved the world.

[8 : 42] And that maybe doesn't seem like a surprise to us, does it? That is how we expect God to feel about the world, if we're watching the Discovery Channel, and it's how we expect God to feel about us.

We are good people, aren't we? We're nice. We're good people, we're lovable people. That's how we expect God to feel about us, and that's how we expect other people to feel about us, isn't it?

But can I ask you that if people knew all there was to know about you this afternoon, would you still expect them to love you? If people knew every single thought that you'd had about them, and everything that you've said in private about them, if they could see every moment of anger, every hidden thing of your life was somehow recorded and played on a big screen behind us, would you still expect them to love you then?

You know, speaking personally, love is the last thing I'd expect you to feel for me. Actually, when you strip away the veneer, I am pretty unlovable underneath it all.

The real me actually makes me feel pretty ashamed. And so, it is amazing, really, isn't it, how if we feel like that with other people, with the real me, we can imagine that God would love us with all that he knows about us.

[10 : 13] So, do you see the shock of what Jesus is saying here? Jesus' death is motivated by God's love, not of the lovable you, but of the unlovable you, and of the real you.

God loves the unlovable, and that is the motivation behind this plan. Now, you might be thinking, well, if God does love me, he's got a bit of a funny way of showing it, hasn't he? It is not the most romantic thing, is it, to declare your love for somebody and then just kind of die for them. If I say to my wife, I love you, and then I just run in front of a bus, it makes no sense at all. Jesus' death was intentional, and it was loving, but thirdly and crucially, it was loving because it was necessary. His death was necessary.

Just look at verse 14 again. Jesus says, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

[11:15] that whoever believes in him may have life. Verse 17, in order that the world might be saved through him. John is saying quite clearly here, isn't he, that because Jesus dies, people who believe in him can have life.

But unless Jesus dies, there is no life. unless Jesus dies, actually we are in great danger, and we need saving, is the word he uses.

Jesus' death is loving because somehow it is absolutely necessary for us. And I think we get a clue about why that is in verse 18. If you look down, he says, whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he's not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

There's a TV show on iPlayer, BBC iPlayer at the moment, that follows the life of prisoners on death row. It's interesting, it's slightly morbid, in a prison in America.

And many of these inmates, many of them are there for years, sometimes decades, but in the end their fate is always clear. They know where they're heading. But what is truly bizarre about this place is that prisoners can kind of get on with something of a normal life.

[12:48] Outside, the prisoners can while away their time playing basketball. They can have a game of cards with other inmates. They can chat, they can enjoy sports.

It is a truly bizarre scene where you can see these guys playing basketball outside, knowing that there is a day not far away than when they will meet their fate. But while there is some semblance of life in the prison, they are constantly reminded of where they are going.

Because to get back into the building, back into their cells, they have to walk past the sign that says, condemned unit. There are signs around the basketball saying, condemned exercise yard.

And then in the corridors, as they walk to their cells, there is a sign saying, condemned row. And no matter how much basketball they play, and how many card games they play, they can never forget where they are heading.

They know they are condemned men. They are condemned to die. They are condemned to death already. And you see, that is a poor illustration really, but that is why John says Jesus' mission to die was necessary.

[14:06] Because there is a God who made this world, and whilst he is a God of love, he does not love all things. This God of love, he does not love murder.

And he doesn't love rape. He doesn't love the kind of things that people get put in prison for. He is a loving God, but he doesn't love all things.

He hates some things, and that is good, isn't it? It is not loving to say, well, there is child abuse in the world, but I'm not all that bothered actually. Actually, he is a loving God because he doesn't love all things.

He hates wrong things, and he hates evil. And he does something about wrong things. He condemns it to judgment.

He sets a date when all wrong things will be put right. And actually, wrong things will be put to death forever, to make a world that is only good.

[15:12] And the more we look at ourselves, that sounds like good news, doesn't it? But the more we look at ourselves, the more we realise that we ourselves are part of those condemned things. Yes, he is a God of love, but he doesn't love all things.

He doesn't love pride. He doesn't love selfishness. He doesn't love anger. He doesn't love envy. And as you go through the list, it gets really close to home, doesn't it?

And the more I'm honest with myself, I realise that this truly loving God, if he really is loving, then he should condemn me. problem is, isn't it, that we believe that when Jesus comes, we are in some way morally neutral, or we're kind of just good people.

But John says, no, the verdict has already been given even before Jesus came. He is a God of love because he doesn't love all things, and he condemns some things, and he condemns evil, and so

that means as well as those great big crimes we hear of that people go to prison for, I am also in danger.

Jesus comes intentionally, and lovingly, and necessarily to bear the weight of my condemnation, so that all of my wrongdoing might be condemned to death, whilst I can still live.

[16 : 45] It's what John says, isn't it, verse 17, in order, that the world might be saved through him. And just notice how there is no other way that God can do this.

There is no other way of us avoiding the condemnation that we deserve. See, God gives his only son that we should be saved through him. So it's less, isn't it, God is a loving God but Jesus died. Actually, it is, God is a loving God, so Jesus dies and Jesus is killed. It was intentional, it was planned, and it was the most loving thing that God could do for us, to do what was necessary for condemned people like you and for me.

We're going to close now. Really, you've got to think about the options, haven't you? How do you respond to this message? Because the one thing that you can't do is just sit on the fence with this, isn't it?

You can't be indifferent to this message. Your response will either say, this is all just make believe, none of it is true, and Jesus really hasn't got anything to do with me, and I don't want anything to do with him.

[18 : 05] Or, you can admit that Jesus shows us a God who is everything to do with me. And, he is a God who is your only hope in the face of condemnation, the condemnation that really you know you deserve.

And if you can admit that, then John says quite simply, what you need to do is believe, isn't it? That whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

That your condemnation is laid upon Jesus, and it's put to death, that you might live forever. And so I'm going to pray now to ask God to help us to do this.