

Baker's Dozen Series

God's Immeasurable Love

B. B. Warfield

John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life."

To whom we owe this great declaration of the love of God, it is somewhat difficult to determine: whether to our Lord himself, or to that disciple who had lain upon his bosom and had imbibed so much of his spirit that he thenceforth spoke with his Master's voice and in his Master's words. Happily, it is a matter of no substantial importance. For what difference does it make to you and me whether the Lord speaks to us through his own lips, or through those of his servant, the apostle, to whom he had promised, and to whom he had given, his Holy Spirit to teach him all the truth (John 16:13)?

What concerns us is not the instrumentality through which the message comes, but the message itself. And what a great message it is - the message of the greatness of the love of God! Let us see to it that, as the words sound in our ears, it is this great revelation that fills our hearts, fills them so full as to flood all their being and wash into all their recesses. The greatness of the love of God, the immeasurable greatness of the love of God!

Does "the World" Mean "All without Exception"?

This exhortation is not altogether superfluous. Strange as it may sound, it is true, that many - perhaps the majority - of those who feed their souls on this great declaration, seem to have trained themselves to think, when it falls upon their ears, in the first instance at least, not so much of how great - how immeasurably great - *God's love* is, but rather of how great *the world* is. It is the world that God loves, they say, the world. And forthwith they fall to thinking how *great* the world is, and how, nevertheless, God loves it all. Think, they cry, of the multitudes of men who swarm over the face of the earth, and have swarmed over it through all the countless generations from the beginning, and will swarm over it in ever-increasing numbers through perhaps even more countless generations yet to

come, until the end. And God loves them all, each and every one of them, from the least to the greatest; so loves them that he has given his only begotten Son to die for them, for each and every one of them. And for each and every one of them with the same intent - the intent, namely, that he may be saved. O, how great the love of God must be to embrace in its compass these uncounted multitudes of men. And so to embrace them that every individual that enters as a constituent unit into the mass of mankind receives his full share of it, or rather is inundated by its undivided and undiminished flood!

Certainly this is a great conception. But it is just as certainly *not a great enough conception* to meet the requirements of our text. For, look, will you measure the immeasurable greatness of God's love by the measure of man? All these multitudes of men who have lived, do live, or shall live, from the beginning to the end of the world's entire span - what is their finite sum to the infinitude of God? Lo, the world, and all that is in the world - and all that has ever been in the world or can ever be in the world - lies as *nothing* in the sight of the Infinite One, floats as an evanescent particle in his eternal vision. How can we exalt our conception of the greatness of the divine love by thinking of it as great enough to embrace all this? Can we praise the blacksmith's brawn by declaring him capable of supporting a mustard seed on his outstretched palm? This standard is too small! We cannot compute such masses in terms of it. Conceive the world as vastly as you may, it remains ever incommensurate with the immeasurable love of God.

And what warrant does the text offer for conceiving so greatly of the world, or indeed for thinking of it at all under the category of extension, as if it were its size that was oppressing the imagination of the speaker, and its parts - down to the last analysis - that were engaging his wondering attention? Evidently the text envisages the world, of which it speaks in the concrete, as a whole. This world is made up of parts, no doubt, and the differing destinies that await the individuals which compose it are adverted to. But the emphasis does not fall upon its component elements, as if their number, for example, could form the ground of the divine love, or explain the wonder of its greatness. Distribution of it into its elements and engagement with the individuals which compose it is merely the result of the false start made when the mind falls away from contemplating the immensity of the love of God with which the text is freighted, to absorb itself rather in wonder over the greatness of the world which is loved.

And having begun with this false step, it is not surprising if the wandering mind finds itself shortly lost in admiration not even of the greatness of the world, but rather of the greatness of *the individual soul*. These souls of men, each and every one of which God loves so deeply that he has given his Son to die for it - what

great, what noble, what glorious things they must be! O what value each of us should place upon this precious soul of ours that God so highly esteemed as to give his Son to die for it! A great and inspiring thought, again, beyond all doubt; but, again, obviously *not great enough* to be the thought of the text. Clearly, what the text invites us to think of is the greatness of *the love of God*, not the greatness of the human soul.

And how can we fancy that we can measure the love of God by what he has done for each and every human soul? Persist in reading the text thus distributively, making “the world” mean each and every man that lives on the earth, and what, after all, does it declare that the love of God has done for them? Just open a way of salvation before men, give them an opportunity to save themselves. For, what, in that contingency, does the text assert? Just this: that “God so loved the world” - that is, each and every man that has lived, does live, or shall live in this world - “that he gave his only begotten Son, that *whosoever believeth on him* should not perish, but have eternal life.” “Whosoever believeth on him” - those only.

Is this, then, the measure of the immeasurable love of God - that he barely opens a pathway to salvation before sinful men, and stops right there; does nothing further for them - leaving it to their own unassisted initiative whether they will walk in it or not? Surely this cannot be the teaching of the text; and that, for many reasons. Primary among them is this: that we all know that the love of God has done *much* more than this for multitudes of the children of men, namely, has not merely opened a way of salvation before them, but has *actually saved them*.

Nor is our text silent on this point. It is *not* in this mere opening of a way of salvation before each and every man that the love of God for the world is declared by it to issue, but in the actual *saving* of the world. We read the next verse and we discover it asserting that God sent his Son into the world for this specific end - that the world should be “saved by him.” God did not then only so love the world as to give it a bare *chance* of salvation; he so loved the world that he *saved* the world. And surely this is something far better. It provides a much higher standard by which to estimate the greatness of God’s love.

We discover, then, that the distribution of the term “world” in our text into “each and every man in the world” not only begins with the obvious misstep of directing our attention at once rather to the greatness of the world than to the greatness of God’s love and only infers the latter from the former. It ends by positively belittling the love of God, as if it could content itself with half-measures - nay, in numerous instances, with what is practically no measure at all. For if it is satisfied with merely opening a way of salvation and leaving men to

walk in this way or not as they will, the hard facts of life force us to add that it is satisfied with merely opening a way of salvation for multitudes to whom it should never be made known that a way of salvation lay open before them, although their sole hope is in their walking in it.

And why dwell on special cases? Shall we not recognize frankly that so meager a provision would be operative in no case? For even when it is made known to men that a way of salvation is opened before them, can they - being sinners - walk in it? Let our passage itself tell us. Does it not explicitly declare that every one that doeth ill hateth the light and cometh not to the light? And who of us does not know that he, at least - if not every man - doeth ill? Does the love of God expend itself then in inoperative manifestations?

Surely not so can be measured the love of God, of which the Scriptures tell us that its height and depth and length and breadth pass knowledge; of which Paul declares that nothing can separate us from it - not death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature; of which he openly asserts that if it avails to reconcile us with God, through the death of his Son, much more shall it avail to bring us into the fruition of salvation by his life.

Does “the World” Mean “the Elect”?

Obviously, then, the distribution of the notion “world” in our text into “each and every man” in the world, does less than justice to the infinitude of the love of God which it is plainly the object of the text to exalt in our thought. Reacting from the ineptitudes of this interpretation, and determined at all costs to take the conception of the love of God at the height of its idea, men of deeper insight have therefore suggested that it is not the world at large that is in question in the text, but God’s people, the chosen of God in the world.

Surely, it is God’s seeking, nay, God’s finding love that is celebrated here, they argue - the love which goes out to its object with a vigor which no obstacle can withstand, and, despite every difficulty, brings it safely into the shelter of its arms. The “world” that God so loved that he gave his Son for it - surely that is not the “world” that he loved so little as to leave it to take or leave the Son so given, as its own wayward heart might dictate; but the “world” that he loved enough, after giving his Son for it, powerfully to move upon with his quickening Spirit and graciously to lead into the offered salvation. This is the “world” of believers, in a word, as they are called in the following clause, or, as they are called elsewhere in Scripture, the “world” of God’s elect. It was these whom God

loved before the foundation of the world with a love beyond all expression great and strong, constant and prevailing, a love which was not and could not be defeated, just because it was love, the very characteristic of which, Paul tells us, is that it suffereth long, is not provoked, taketh no account of evil, beareth all things, endureth all things, yea, never faileth: and therefore was not and could not be satisfied until it had brought its objects home.

It is very clear that this interpretation has the inestimable advantage over the one formerly suggested, that it penetrates into the heart of the matter and refuses to evacuate the text of its manifest purport. The text is given to enhance in our hearts the conception of the love of God to sinners: to make us to know somewhat of the height and depth and length and breadth of it, though truly it passes knowledge. It will not do, then, as we read it, to throw limitations around this love, as if it could not accomplish that whereto it is set.

Beyond all question, the love which is celebrated is the saving love of God; and the "world" which is declared to be the object of this love is a "world" that is not merely given an opportunity of salvation, but actually saved. As none but believers - or, if you choose to look at them *sub specie aeternitatis*, none but the elect - attain salvation, so it seems but an identical proposition to say that it is just the world of believers, or the world of the elect, that is embraced in the love of God here celebrated. When the text declares, therefore, that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son for it, is not what is meant, and what must be meant, just the elect scattered throughout the world?

It may seem strange to us, indeed, to speak of the elect as "the world." But is not that largely because, in the changed times in which we live, we do not sufficiently poignantly appreciate or deal seriously enough with the universalism of Christianity in contrast with the nationalism of the old dispensation? In this universalistic and new covenant gospel of John, especially, what is more natural than to find the "world" brought into contrast with Jewish exclusivism? In short, is not the meaning of our text just this: that Jesus Christ came to make propitiation for the sins not of Jews only, but of the whole world, that is to say, not of course to reach each and every man who lives in the world, but in any event for men living *throughout* the world, heirs of the world's fortunes?

Certainly it is difficult for us to appreciate the greatness of the revolution wrought in the religious consciousness of men like John, bred in the exclusivism of Judaism and accustomed to think of the Messiah as the peculiar property of Israel, when the worldwide mission of Christianity was brought home to their minds and hearts. To John and men like John, its universalism was no doubt well-

nigh the most astonishing fact about Christianity. And the declaration that God so loved the world - not Israel exclusively, but the world - that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever - from every nation, not from the Jews merely - should believe on him should have eternal life. This great declaration must have struck upon their hearts with a revelation of the wideness of God's mercy and the unfathomable profundities of his love such as we can scarcely appreciate in our days of age-long familiarity with the great fact. Is not this, then, the real meaning of the immense declaration of the text: that Jesus Christ is the worldwide Savior, that now the middle wall of partition has been broken down and God has called to himself a people out of all the nations of the earth, and has so loved this his people gathered thus from the whole world, that he has given his only begotten Son to die for them? And is not this a truth big with consequences, worthy of such a record as is given it in our text, and capable of awakening in our hearts a most profound response?

Assuredly no one will doubt the value and inspiration of such suggestions. The truth that lies in them, who can gainsay? But it is difficult to feel that they quite exhaust the meaning of the great words of the text.

In their effort to do justice to the conception of the love of God, do they not do something less than justice to the conception embodied in the term "the world"? In identifying "the world" with believers, do they not neglect, if we may not quite say the contrast of the two things, yet at least the distinction between the two notions which the text seems to institute? "God so loved the world," we read, "that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." Certainly here "the world" and "believers" do not seem to be quite equivalent terms. There seems, surely, something conveyed by the one which is not wholly taken up in the other. How, then, shall we say that "the world" means just "the world of believers," just those scattered through the world, who, being the elect of God, shall believe in his Son and so have eternal life?

There is obviously much truth in this idea: and the main difficulty which it faces may, no doubt, be avoided by saying that what is taught is that God's love of the world is shown by his saving so great a multitude as he does save out of the world. The wicked world deserved at his hands only total destruction. But he saves out of it a multitude which no man can number, out of every nation, and of all tribes and peoples and tongues. How much, then, must God love the world! This interpretation, beyond question, reproduces the fundamental meaning of the text. But does it completely satisfy all its suggestions? Does there not lie in the text some more subtle sequence of thought than is explicated by it? Is there not

implied in it some profounder and yet more glorious truth than even the worldwide reach of God's love, manifested in the Great Commission, and issuing in the multitude of the saved, the voice of whose praise ascends to heaven as the voice of many waters and as the voice of mighty thunders?

What Does John 3:16 Actually Say?

Neither of the more common interpretations of the text, therefore, appears to bring out quite fully its real significance. The one fails to rise to the height of the conception of the *love of God* embodied in it. The other appears to do something less than full justice to the conception of *the world* which God is said to love. The difficulty in both cases seems to arise from a certain unwillingness to go deeply enough. A surface meaning, possible to impose upon the text, seems to be seized upon, while its profundities are left unexplored.

If we would make our own the great revelation of the love of God here given us, we must be more patient. Renouncing the easy imposition upon it of meanings of our own devising, we must just permit the text to speak its own language to our hearts. Its prime intention is to convey some conception of the immeasurable greatness of the love of God. The method it employs to do this is to declare the love of God for the world so great that he gave his Son to save it. The central affirmation obviously, then, is this - and it is a sufficiently great one to absorb our entire attention - that God loved the world. "*God,*" "*loved,*" "*the world*" - *we must deal seriously with this great assertion, and with every element of it.* We must first of all, then, thoroughly enter into the meaning of the three great terms here brought together: "God," "loved," "the world."

We shall not make the slightest step forward in understanding our text, for instance, so long as we permit ourselves to treat the great term "God" merely as the subject of a sentence. We must endeavor rather to rise as nearly as may be to its fullest significance. When we pronounce the word, we must see to it that our minds are flooded with some wondering sense of God's infinitude, of his majesty, of his ineffable exaltation, of his holiness, of his righteousness, of his flaming purity and stainless perfection. This is the Lord God Almighty, whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, to whom the earth is less than the small dust on the balance. He has no need of anything, nor can his unsullied blessedness be in any way affected - whether by way of increase or decrease - by any act of the creatures of his hands. What we call infinite space is but a speck on the horizon of his contemplation. What we call infinite time is in his sight but as yesterday when it is past. Serene in his unapproachable glory, his will is the irresistible law of all existences to which their every motion conforms. Clothed in majesty and girded

with strength, righteousness and judgment are the foundation of his throne. He sits in the heavens and does whatsoever he pleases. It is this God - a God of whom to say that he is the Lord of all the earth is to say so little that it is to say nothing at all - of whom our text speaks. And if we are ever to catch its meaning we must bear this fully in mind.

Now the text tells us of this God - of *this* God, remember - that he “loves.” In itself, before we proceed a step further, this is a marvelous declaration. The metaphysicians have not yet plumbed it and still protest inability to construe the Absolute in terms of love. We shall not stop to dwell upon this somewhat abstract discussion. It is enough for us that a God without emotional life would be a God without all that lends its highest dignity to personal spirit whose very being is movement, and that is as much as to say no God at all. And it is more than enough for us that our text assures us that God loves, nay, that he *is* Love.

What it concerns us now to note, however, is not the mere fact that he loves, but what it is that he is declared to love. For therein lies the climax of the great proclamation. This is nothing other than “the world.” For this is the unimaginable declaration of the text: “God so loved the world.” It is just in this that lies the mystery of the greatness of his love.

For what is this “world” which we are so strangely told that God loves? We must not throw the reins on the neck of our fancy and seek a response that will suit our ideas of the right or the fitting. We must just let the Scriptures themselves tell us, and primarily that apostle to whom we owe this great declaration. Nor does he fail to tell us, and that without the slightest ambiguity. The “world,” he tells us, is just the synonym of all that is evil and noisome and disgusting. There is nothing in it that can attract God’s love - nay, that can justify the love of any good man. It is a thing not to be dallied with or acquiesced in. They that are of it are by that very fact not of God. And what the Christian has to do with it is just to overcome it. For everything that is begotten of God manifests that great fact precisely by this: that he overcomes the world. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” (1 John 2:15a) is John’s insistent exhortation. And the reason for it he states very pungently: because “if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15b).

“God” and the “world,” then, are precise contradictions. “Nothing that is in the world is of the Father,” we are told. Or, as it is put elsewhere in direct positive form, “The whole world lieth in the evil one” (1 John 5:19). “The world, the flesh, and the devil” - this is the pregnant combination in which we have learned from

Scripture to express the baleful forces that war against the soul: and the three terms are thus cast together because they are essentially synonyms.

See, then, whither we are brought. When we are told that God loves the world, it is much as if we were told that he loves the flesh and the devil. And we may, indeed, take courage from our text and say it boldly: God does love the world and the flesh and the devil. Therein indeed is the ground of all our comfort and all our hope. For we - you and I - are of the world and of the flesh and of the devil. Only - we must punctually note it - the love wherewith God loves the world, the flesh, and the devil - therefore, us - is *not* a love of *complacency*, as if he, the Holy One and the Good, could take pleasure in what is worldly, fleshly, devilish; but that love of *benevolence* which would fain save us from our worldliness, fleshliness, and devilishness.

That indeed is precisely what the text goes on at once to say: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." The world then was perishing. And it was to save it that God gave his Son. The text is, then, you see, in principle an account of the coming of the Son of God into the world. There were but two things for which he, being what he was as the Son of God, could come into the world, being what it was - to *judge* the world, or to *save* the world. It was for the latter that he came. "For," the next verse runs on, "God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him." Not wrath, then, though wrath were due, but love was the impelling cause of the coming of the Son of God into this wicked world of ours. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." The intensity of the love is what is emphasized. It is so intense that it was not deterred even by the sinfulness of its objects.

You will perceive that what we have here then is, in effect, but John's way of saying what Paul says when he tells us that "God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

The marvel, in other words, which the text brings before us is just that marvel above all other marvels in this marvelous world of ours - the marvel of God's love for *sinners*. And this is the measure by which we are invited to measure the greatness of the love of God. It is not that it is so great that it is able to extend over the whole of a big world. It is so great that it is able to prevail over the holy God's hatred and abhorrence of sin! For herein is love, that *God* could love the *world* - the world that lies in the evil one: that God, who is all holy and just and

good, could so love this world that he gave his only begotten Son for it - that he might not judge it, but that it might be saved.

The key to the passage lies, therefore, you see, in the significance of the term "world." It is not here a term of extension so much as a term of intensity. Its primary connotation is ethical, and the point of its employment is not to suggest that the world is so *big* that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so *bad* that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God has loved it when he gave his Son for it.

The whole debate as to whether the love here celebrated distributes itself to each and every man that enters into the composition of the world, or terminates on the elect alone, chosen out of the world, lies thus outside the immediate scope of the passage and does not supply any key to its interpretation. The passage was not intended to teach, and certainly does not teach, that God loves all men alike and visits each and every one alike with the same manifestations of his love. And as little was it intended to teach or does it teach that his love is confined to a few especially chosen individuals selected out of the world. What it is intended to do is to arouse in our hearts a wondering sense of the marvel and the mystery of the love of God for the sinful world - conceived, here, not quantitatively but qualitatively as, in its very distinguishing characteristic, sinful.

And search the universe through and through - in all its recesses and through all its historical development - and you will find no marvel so great, no mystery so unfathomable, as this: that the great and good God, whose perfect righteousness flames in indignation at the sight of every iniquity and whose absolute holiness recoils in abhorrence in the presence of every impurity, yet he loves this sinful world - yes, has so loved it that he has given his only begotten Son to die for it! It is this marvel and this mystery that our text would fain carry home to our hearts, and we would be wise if we would permit them to be absorbed in its contemplation.

God's All-Conquering Love

At the same time, however, although we cannot permit the passage to be interpreted in the terms of the debate in question, it would not be quite true to say it has no bearing upon that debate.

One thing, for instance, which the passage tells us, and tells us with great emphasis, is that *the love which it celebrates is a saving love*; not a love which merely tends towards salvation, and may - perhaps easily - be defeated in its aim by, say,

the unwillingness of its objects. The very point of the passage lies, on the one side, in the mightiness of the love of God; and, on the other, in the unwillingness not of some but of all its objects.

The love here celebrated is, we must remember, the love of *God* - of the Lord God Almighty: and it is love for the *world* - which altogether "lies in the evil one." It is a love which is great and powerful and all-conquering, which attains its end and will not stand helpless before any obstacle. It is the precise purpose of the passage to teach us this, to raise our hearts to some apprehension of the inconceivable greatness of the love of God, set as it is upon saving the wicked world. It would be possible to believe that such a love as this terminates equally and with the same intent upon each and every man who is in "the world," only if we may at the same time believe that it works out its end completely and with full effect on each and every man. But this the passage explicitly forbids us to believe, proceeding at once to divide the "world" into two classes, those that perish and those that have eternal life. The almighty, all-conquering love of God, therefore, certainly does not pour itself equally and with the same intent upon each and every man in the world. In the sovereignty that belongs of necessity to his love as to all love, he rather visits with it whom he will.

But neither will the text allow us to suppose that God grants this immeasurable love only to a few, abstracted from the world, while the world itself he permits to fall away to its destruction. The declaration is not that God has loved some out of the world, but that he has loved the world. And we must rise to the height of this divine universalism.

It is the world that God has loved with his deathless love, this sinful world of ours. And it is the world, this sinful world of ours, that he has given his Son to die for. And it is the world that through the sacrifice of his dear Son, he has saved, this very sinful world of ours. "God sent not the Son into the world," we read, "to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him" (John 3:17). That is to say, God did not send his Son into the world for the purpose of judging the world, but for the purpose of saving the world - a declaration which could not be true if, despite his coming, the world were lost and only a select few saved out of it. The purposes of God do not fail.

You must not fancy, then, that God sits helplessly by while the world, which he has created for himself, hurtles hopelessly to destruction, and he is able only to snatch with difficulty here and there a brand from the universal burning. The world does not govern him in a single one of his acts. He governs it and leads it steadily onward to the end which, from the beginning, or before a beam of it had

been laid, he had determined for it. As it was created for his glory, so shall it show forth his praise. And this human race on which he has impressed his image shall reflect that image in the beauty of the holiness which is its supreme trait.

The elect - they are not the residuum of the great conflagration, the ashes, so to speak, of the burnt-up world, gathered sadly together by the Creator, after the catastrophe is over, that he may make a new and perhaps better beginning with them and build from them, perchance, a new structure, to replace that which has been lost. Nay, *they are themselves "the world"* - not the world as it is in its sin, lying in the evil one, but the world *in its promise and potency of renewed life*.

Through all the years, one increasing purpose runs, one *increasing* purpose: the kingdoms of the earth become ever more and more the kingdoms of our God and his Christ. The process may be slow; the progress may appear to our impatient eyes to lag. But it is God who is building! And under his hands the structure rises as steadily as it does slowly, and in due time the capstone shall be set into its place, and to our astonished eyes shall be revealed nothing less than a saved world!

Meanwhile, we who live in the midst of the process see not yet the end. These are days of incompleteness, and it is only by faith that we can perceive the issue. The kingdom of God is as yet only in the making, and the "world" is not yet saved. So, there appear about us two classes - there are those that perish as well as those that have eternal life. With the absoluteness which characterizes the writer of this gospel, these two classes are set before us in the text and in the paragraph of which it forms a part, in their intrinsic antagonism. They are believers and unbelievers in the Son of God. And they are believers and unbelievers in the Son of God, because they are in their essential natures good or bad, lovers of light or lovers of darkness. "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, and cometh not to the light... But he that doeth the truth cometh to the light" (John 3:20-21). Throughout the whole process of the world's development, therefore, the Light that has come into the world draws to himself those who are of the light. He, that is, who through love of the world came into the world to save the world - yea, and who *shall* save the world - in the meantime attaches to himself in every generation those who in their essential nature belong to him.

How they came to be his, and therefore to be attracted to him, and therefore to enter into the life that is life indeed - to become portions no longer of the world that lies in the evil one, but of the reconstructed world that abides in him - the paragraph in which our text is set leaves us much uninformed. Accordingly, some rash expositors wish to insist that to it the division of men into the essentially

good and the essentially bad is an ultimate fact. They speak therefore much of the ineradicable dualism of Jesus' conception, not staying to consider the confusion thus wrought in the whole paragraph. For in that case how could there be talk of the Son of God coming into the world to save the world? Obviously, to the text, those who belong to the Son themselves require saving. That is to say, no less than the lost themselves, they belong by nature to the "evil one," in whom the whole world - not a part of it only - we are told explicitly, "lieth."

And if we will but attend to the context in which our paragraph is set, we will perceive that we are not left without guidance to its proper understanding. For we must remember that this paragraph is not an isolated document standing off to itself and complete in itself, but is a comment upon the discourse of our Lord to Nicodemus. It necessarily receives its color and explanation, therefore, from that discourse of which it is either a substantive part or upon which it is at least a reflection. And what does that discourse teach us except this: that all that is born of flesh is flesh, and only what is reborn of Spirit is Spirit; that no man can enter the kingdom of God, therefore, except he be born again of God; and that this birth is not at the command of men, but is the gift of a Spirit which is like the wind that bloweth where it listeth, the sound whereof we hear though we know not whence it cometh and whither it goeth - but can say of it only, Lo, it is here!

Here then is the explanation of the essential difference in men revealed in the varying reception they give to the Son of God. It is not due to accident of birth or to diversity of experience in the world, least of all to inherent qualities of goodness or badness belonging to each by nature. It is due solely to this - whether or not they have been born again by the Spirit and so are of the light and come spontaneously to the light when it dawns upon their waiting eyes.

The sequence in this great process of salvation, then, according to our passage, when taken in its context, is this: the fight of the Son of God to save the world; the preparation of the hearts of men to receive the Son of God in vital faith; the attraction of these "children of the light" to the Light of the world; and the rebuilding of the fabric of the world along the lines of God's choosing into that kingdom of light which is thus progressively prepared for its perfect revelation at the last day.

Thus, then, it is that God is saving the world - the world, mind you, and not merely some individuals out of the world - by a process which involves not supplanting but reformation, re-creation. We look for new heavens and a new earth, it is true; but these new heavens and new earth are not another heaven and another earth, but the old heaven and old earth renewed; or, as the Scriptures phrase it, "regenerated." For not the individual merely, but the fabric of the world

itself, is to be regenerated in that “regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory” (Matt. 19:28). During the process, there may be much that is discarded. But when the process is completed, then also shall be completed the task which the Son of Man has taken upon himself, and the “world” shall be saved - this wicked world of sinful men transformed into a world of righteousness.

Surely, we shall not wish to measure the saving work of God by what has been already accomplished in these unripe days in which our lot is cast. The sands of time have not yet run out. And before us stretch, not merely the reaches of the ages, but the infinitely resourceful reaches of the promise of God. Are not the saints to inherit the earth? Is not the re-created earth theirs? Are not the kingdoms of the world to become the kingdom of God? Is not the knowledge of the glory of God to cover the earth as the waters cover the sea? Shall not the day dawn when no man need say to his neighbor, “Know the Lord,” for all shall know him from the least unto the greatest?

O raise your eyes, raise your eyes, I beseech you, to the far horizon. Let them rest nowhere short of the extreme limit of the divine purpose of grace. And tell me what you see there. Is it not the supreme, the glorious, issue of that love of God which loved, not one here and there only in the world, but the world in its organic completeness; and gave his Son, not to judge the world, but that the world through him should be saved?

And he spake with me, saying, Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb. And he ... showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God... And the city hath no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine upon it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the lamp thereof is the Lamb. And the nations shall walk amidst the light thereof: and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it. And the gates thereof shall in no wise be shut by day (for there shall be no night there): and they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it: and there shall in no wise enter into it anything unclean, or he that maketh an abomination and a lie: but only they that are written in the Lamb’s book of life. (Rev. 21:9–11, 23–27)

Only those written in the Lamb’s book of life, and yet all the nations! It is the vision of the saved world. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.” It is the vision of the consummated purpose of the immeasurable love of God.

The author was professor of didactic and polemic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1887 until his death in 1921. This article was originally a sermon preached in the Princeton chapel, and has been slightly edited. The Bible quotations are from the ASV. Reprinted from New Horizons, April 2003.