

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 20:24-31 "Whoever Believes in Him"

In our little excursion into Christian theology, we're currently unpacking word by word John 3:16 – *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* We saw that "God so loved the world," means that *the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of all things is devoted to the welfare of people who oppose him;* and "gave his one and only Son" means *God's rescue plan was that his Incarnate Son by his death would atone for the world's sin.* Now we come to the human consequences of God's great act in Jesus: "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." What does that mean? What does it mean to you and me, here and now?

1) *Whoever*

First we need to know what "whoever" means. It signals that God's promise in the Old Testament that he would bless the world through his people Israel has now come true: Abraham and his descendants, Israel as a nation, his "Suffering Servant" Jesus, have now extended God's rescue mission to *all the world;* the "people of God" will now include "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5). In the 1st century, of course, that meant Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and Romans, people from India to North Africa to Romania to Spain. The Christian gospel was for slave and free, women and men, young and old. No-one was excluded by

birth, language, education, social status, prior beliefs, past sins or ignorance.

It still means just that. It includes people from North America like you and me, it includes Anglos and Hispanics and Asians; it includes respectable suburbanites and city street people, slum dwellers from all over the world; Democrats and Republicans; Pentecostals, Catholics, Baptists, Congregationalists...

Two weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending a Preaching Conference at my *alma mater*, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. In one teaching session, their Professor of World Missions brought us up to date on the huge changes in world Christianity in the past 20 years. The center of Christianity is moving rapidly south and east; it is no longer based in Europe and North America. Every day now, Africa gains 20000 new Christians, while Europe loses 4000. Best estimates say 100 million Chinese are now Christians. The largest churches anywhere are in Korea. The United States, still unusually Christian in the western industrialized world, is *becoming even more Christian because of immigration* – 65% of immigrants are Christians or become so when they get here.

"Whoever" believes in Jesus is now a world-wide question: for example, whether China in the next 30 years becomes not only a very

powerful nation economically, militarily and socially, but perhaps also a Christian nation. God is at work in ways you and I have no idea about! But it is still true that “whoever” – you, me, your spouse, your kids, your brother, your sister, your mother or your father, can still become a Christian; can still be beneficiaries of “God’s devotion to the welfare of people who oppose him.” But how?

2) *Who Believe In Him*

What does it mean to “believe in him”? The first thing to say is that the New Testament never deals in the distinction we make between “believing” and “knowing.” *There is nothing fuzzy or uncertain about “believing.”* And for John the Gospel-writer, “believing” is the theme of his Preface: “*he came unto his own, but his own did not receive him; but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*” (Jn 1:12); and it is the summary of all his writing “*these things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*” (Jn 20:31).

One sense of “to believe” is of course *to give assent to the facts*. So “to believe in Jesus” means at least that we agree that *he is who he says he is, that he spoke the truth, and that his atoning death was necessary*. These are, you could say, “the facts” that a believer gives assent to. Jesus was and is the Son of God. Jesus spoke truly about his mission: that he came to redeem sinners, to show God’s love, to bring in the kingdom, to teach believers how to live. The hardest for most people to assent to is the claim that *Jesus’ atonement was necessary* to deal with people like you and me who by nature are often opposed to God, don’t much like God, frequently turn our backs on him, insist on our own ways, and rationalize to ourselves we are actually more

moral than he is, or than other people are, or than we actually are ourselves!

But there is more to “believing” than giving our intellectual assent to statements by or about Jesus. There is also, and centrally from a Biblical point of view, *the issue of trust*. Assenting to theological statements is not faith – is not “believing in Jesus.” It is placing our unreserved trust in him; turning away from our own threadbare sense of well-being to rest in the love and action of the Father and the Son; turning from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness; seeking forgiveness for opposing God; *personally embracing* Jesus, who by his atonement has opened a door of reconciliation for us to meet God afresh and unafraid.

So the person who “believes in Jesus” is also called someone who trusts him, comes to him, accepts him, receives him, knows him, acknowledges him, follows him, obeys him, eats and drinks from him and of him, listens to him, hears his voice, loves him, lives for him, abides in him, is united with him, entrusts his life to Jesus as his Lord and Savior. A “believer” rests in Jesus’ promise that because the believer is *joined to him spiritually, nothing can separate them* – not dangers or troubles in this life, not the judgment to come in the next. It is *a deeply personal relationship* that goes far beyond assenting to statements, to trust and obedience and gratitude and devotion.

Do you know what that’s like? Or are you still, despite all, stuck at the “skeptical about some of the statements” stage of half-faith? Then walk past your doubts, and *trust the person!* Let belief/trust/faith come first, and understanding come later – let it fill the rest of your life, because you will never understand it all!

3) *Shall Not Perish But Have Eternal Life*

But we still have to grasp the full logic of this sentence. "God so loves" ... "that he gave" ... "that whoever believes" ... What is this all leading to? That believers "*shall not perish but have eternal life.*" This is God's answer to his devotion to the welfare of his opponents: that they should not perish but have eternal life.

Now on the surface that seems to say that "*God's enemies won't die but will be immortal.*" But that, we know, doesn't fit the facts of the world that Jesus or we live in! People still die 100% of the time (though some among Jesus' early followers seem to think they were not going to die). So what does "perish" and what does "have eternal life" mean? And how are these connected back to the starting point: *how is this a solution to God's love for his enemies?*

Is this simply a *promise of resurrection*? - that even though all die, believers will in the future be resurrected to another, this time endless, life? In part, yes. And that's at least part of the answer to the "what is a loving God going to do about those who oppose him? Give them another life after this one, where peace and reconciliation will reign?" But there is more here. What, for a start, does "will not perish" mean? That believers will not rot in the grave? Apparently not. So what is "perish"? We are touching here on the least favorite of all theological topics: "to perish" is *to die unreconciled to God* and enter the realm of darkness and silence, the underworld of Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, Hell. These are all images of one reality: *separation from God* - which Biblically is *what death means*.

So "to perish" is also called "to die the second death," to be "cast into the outer darkness," to be among those who "weep and gnash their teeth." It is an image of

remorse over reconciliation long ignored and now impossible. It is a state of being finally left alone with nothing but our own self-centeredness. It is also called a state of desolation, of judgment, of punishment, and sometimes there is even a hint of annihilation. It is a state that people can freely choose, or be thrown into. Its Biblical names evoke the Hebrew and Greek underworlds (Sheol, Hades, Tartarus), but most often (and this is what the English word "hell" translates) the rubbish pit on the southern slope of the mount of Jerusalem, *Gehenna* (originally the Valley of Hinnom), which became infamous in history as a place where depraved kings of Judah had sacrificed their own sons in the fire to Moloch. So Gehenna become the city dump, and its stench and smoke rose continually. "To perish" was, figuratively, to end up in Gehenna; in contemporary language; it might be "*to ruin your life beyond repair.*"

Is this the right end for God's enemies? For "the world" that opposes him? Many people think so. No, says the Christian Gospel! Jesus in love came to deliver "whoever believes" from ruin, deserved though it may be; he died to take away the prospect of Gehenna from anyone who will trust themselves to him. *Believers will not suffer the "second death," and will not be separated from God.*

Instead they have "crossed over from death to life" and receive the gift of "eternal life." Is that immortality - life without end, living forever and ever? John's Gospel especially is concerned to tell its readers that eternal life is something that *begins now*. It's more than, and different from "living forever when you die." It's *sharing in the life of God*. In New Testament Greek there are two words for life, *bios*, which everyone has, and *zoe*, which only some people have. Those who trust themselves to Jesus receive the gift of *zoe*, and share in the life of God, *now*.

Let us pray...

So now, already and always, believers know the Father through the Son, they follow him, they know his voice, they cannot be snatched from his hand; they never hunger or thirst, and they will be raised up at the last day! *Eternal life is a quality of life, not a length; it is a taste of the life of the God who lives outside time - the First and the Last who knows the end from the beginning - and who even now gives a taste of his life to people who trust themselves into the care of his Son. "Eternal life," says Jesus, is knowing God (Jn 17:3) - because to know him is to love him and trust him and be united with him and share in his life.*

C. S. Lewis once famously said that he did not believe the sun had risen this morning because he could see it (indeed you'd better not try to look straight at the sun), but because by the light of the sun he could see everything else clearly. That's a fine reminder of what it's like to come into a personal relationship with Jesus: everything looks different, and clearer, and brighter, and more full of hope and joy and meaning. The Bible calls it "new life," becoming "a child of God" (who, like all children, receives life from its father).

Do you know what that's like? Have you "believed in him," and already know what "eternal life" tastes like? Has the fear of separation from God gone from your life, and been replaced by the peace of reconciliation? Wherever you are, "whoever" you are, remember this: *the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of all things is so devoted to the welfare of people who oppose him, that he planned a rescue by sending his Incarnate Son to die and atone for his enemies' sin; and people who accept that atonement are delivered from ruin or banishment, and instead are gifted to know God and share in his life and love now and forever (Jn 3:16).*

The Gospel of Jesus Christ!