

This Is The Verdict

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[0 : 00] Psalm 36 says, For with you is the fountain of life. In your light do we see light. So, Father, as we come into the light of your word today, we pray you would enlighten our minds and our hearts that through your truth we can see you, we can see your world, and see ourselves more clearly in the light of who you are.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, one thing we get nervous about these days is certainty. We think it's virtuous to sort of say, well, I don't really know.

I can see both sides of that particular argument. It's complex. It's more complicated than that. There's a song that summarizes that really well. It's from years ago, actually. It's by Billy Joel, and it was called Shades of Grey.

Nothing to do with Fifty Shades of Grey, by the way. If you've seen that, you need to repent. But this is a completely different thing. It's a song, and here are the words. He goes on to say, my faith is falling away.

I'm not that sure anymore. He goes on to say, now with the wisdom of yours, I try to reason things out, and the only people I fear are those who never have doubts. Save us all from arrogant men and all the causes therefor.

[1 : 39] I won't be righteous again. I'm not that sure anymore. Shades of grey are all that I find when I look to the enemy line. Black and white is how it should be, but shades of grey are the colours I see.

And today, we see that mentality all over the place, in all walks of life. But when you think about it, we don't actually live consistently with that at all. So there are plenty of things in our lives that we do see as definitely black and white issues.

We wouldn't have much sympathy with someone who said, oh, you know, racism, you know, it's complex. You know, I can see both sides of that. We wouldn't tolerate that. Lots of us wouldn't tolerate that kind of shades of grey approach to human contribution to climate change, for instance. We get very upset when people say, oh, well, you know, the evidence is a bit mixed. So there are times when believing something with conviction is a good thing. It's an important thing. But what about spiritually?

There's even a new book come out in America, becoming a bit of a bestseller, quite a dangerous book, I think, not one I'd recommend, called The Sin of Certainty. But here in John's Gospel, we find that some things are very black and white.

[2 : 51] John chapters 1 and 2, we've looked at together about who Jesus is. John chapter 3, about how you get into his kingdom. And the key verse in chapter 3, that everything else kind of revolves around, orbits around, is verse 16.

So our first point this morning, I've called the surprising effects of belief. And the main surprise of verse 16, obviously, lots about verse 16 is not very surprising, because it's the most famous verse in the Bible.

But what is surprising about it, I think, is just how black and white Jesus is. For 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.

Now when John here talks about the world, in his Gospel, he's talking about humanity, as it stands against God. And it's saying, within humanity, you could have a realm, a box, like a realm of people, and that realm is the realm of the perishing.

And everyone in that realm is heading for eternal death. And if you're in that realm, it's because of your own behavior. We're not the people who we know we ought to be.

[4 : 05] And we see the effects of that in our human relationships. So we can often point out to people that we have the characteristics of that realm by how we treat one another and the damage we cause to the world.

But really, those are just the symptoms of the heart of the human problem. And the heart of the problem is that we've pushed God out of our lives. And that means that we're destined to perish. It's striking, isn't it? Verse 17 is meant to reassure us. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

I think that's a real challenge to our view of God today, that John feels he has to reassure us. God didn't send his son to condemn the world. He has to reassure us because if we thought rightly about who God is and how good he is, then hearing the news that God has arrived in our world in the person of his son should make all of us shudder.

We should be cowering in fear with the news. God's here. And verse 18, it says, whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son.

[5 : 20] In verse 36, whoever rejects the son will not see life for God's wrath remains on him. It's very black and white. Now, why is it like this? The writer, Nigel Byron's helped me with this.

Just to think for a moment, he talks about the enormous offense of a creature rejecting its creator. Just imagine with me for a minute a father and a son.

And the father loves his son and he raises him well and he teaches him how to live in his world. He teaches him how to be good. He says, don't tell lies.

When you see old ladies trying to cross the road, help them get across the road. Gives him rules for life. And his son grows up in this loving relationship and it gets to 18 and it's the time the time comes for him to go off to university.

And his dad helps him pack his bags and says, keep in touch. A week goes by and the dad doesn't hear anything from his son. A month, no contact.

[6 : 25] The son doesn't come home for Christmas. I hope this isn't sounding too familiar to anyone by the way. Anyway, it continues like that all through the year.

He keeps spending dad's money when it arrives in the bank account but there's no contact at all.

The son completely shuts his dad out of his life. How does the dad feel?

Confused? Hurt? Upset? But angry as well. And rightly so, we think, wouldn't we? And the message of the Bible is that's how we've all treated the God who made us.

He made us for relationship and we've severed contact with him. And being a good person around his world doesn't make that right. If you just go back to the father and the son again, imagine that the father decides in the end he's going to go and find his son.

And he goes to the city where his son's at university and he searches around. Eventually, he finds his son in a bar with friends and his son says, Dad, what are you doing here? And his dad says, what do you mean what am I doing here?

[7 : 37] Where have you been? I haven't heard anything from you. And his son says, well, what's your problem? I haven't told any lies. I've been helping old people cross the road.

He's got things rather fundamentally more wrong than that. Who cares how he's treating other people? He's rejected that relationship that his father wanted him to have.

And that's the problem that we all face with God. Even before we think about how we've treated other people in his world, we've rejected him and he made us for that relationship.

And so we're left in that condition described by John in chapter 3, verse 16, perishing. In other words, standing condemned, standing under God's anger.

That is his settled, controlled hostility against us for standing against him. I said it's black and white. That's the dark side.

[8 : 35] What about the good news? Well, there's another box, isn't there, within humanity. Everyone, by default, is in the perishing box. Eternal death.

Everybody. But there is another box, another realm, the realm of eternal life. And in it, everybody is right with God. God approves of them.

They've got God on their side. And they have hope that no matter how much of a mess they make, God is going to transform them gloriously so that they can live forever with him.

And there's only one way to get from the realm of the perishing into that realm of eternal life. You have to believe in Jesus. Believe is trust.

Turn back to God. Trusting in Jesus, depending on him. I remember in my first year at university having to do an essay on the great divides in Britain, in Great Britain today.

[9 : 34] And, you know, talking about gender, talking about geography, about racial divides, ethnic divides. But really, if I'd been a Christian then, I could have written things up very differently, couldn't I?

There is only one divide that matters. There are people who are perishing, everyone, and then there's anyone who believes in Jesus Christ.

They've got eternal life. And looking at the world with those glasses on is very sobering, isn't it? Thousands of people around us every day sharing a carriage with us on the train or the subway, working with us, in lectures with us, walking down Buchanan Street next to us, perishing without Christ.

And nobody gets less than they deserve from God. If God left everybody in the realm of the perishing, none of us would have anything to complain about.

He's not unjust. And yet the effect of believing in Jesus is it transforms your eternity. Whoever believes, whoever you are, whatever you've done, anybody can qualify because it's a free gift.

[10 : 52] Verse 16, God so loved the world that he gave his only son. That isn't how most people view God today. If you ask an atheist, it's well worth doing this, if you have a friend who says they adamantly don't believe in God, to say, could you describe to me the God that you don't believe in?

What's that God like that you don't believe in? Very often, they will describe God as horrible, a dictator, a taker from us.

But the true God is an extraordinary giver. He is the giving father. And he is moved by love for us. He has given us this offer of eternal life at immense cost to himself as he gave his own son, lifted up on a cross to die, as we saw last week.

So that's the surprising effect of belief. So if belief changes your eternal destiny, why doesn't everybody believe?

I don't know how you'd answer that question, but I guess for most of us, our answer to that question, we'd start talking about evidence. We'd think, most people who are not actual Christians, it's because they've not been persuaded by the evidence.

[12 : 04] But when we read John's gospel, we realize that that, that evidence is not the issue. That's our second point, the surprising barrier to belief.

The people around Jesus are seeing loads of evidence. He's showing them by miraculous signs that he can do things only God can do. And for us today, John's gospel is evidence, it's testimony, so that we can believe.

We see that emphasized again and again in the rest of this chapter, as we've seen it for the first couple of chapters of John's gospel. So John the Baptist appears again in verses 22 to 30.

We come back to him. He was the celebrity of his day, whole crowds following him. And in verse 28, he says to those crowds, you yourselves can testify that I said, I am not the Messiah, God's promised one, but I'm sent ahead of him.

So he tells them to testify and they do. And we have that in John's gospel. The other thing about John, sorry, John the Baptist, is that he's like the last great Old Testament prophet.

[13 : 08] And so as we see him say, Jesus is the one, it's as though he's pointing us to how the whole Old Testament points us to Jesus, all the prophets, predicting precisely who Jesus is and what he would come to do.

Alongside those prophets and alongside the witnesses who saw Jesus, is what Jesus says about himself. And that's how John finishes chapter 3.

If you have a look at verse 31, the one who comes from above is above all. The one who is from the earth belongs to the earth and speaks as one from the earth.

The one who comes from heaven is above all. In other words, when Jesus gives his eyewitness testimony, he can describe God himself, he can describe heaven because he is the only one who has come from there.

Verse 32, he testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.

[14 : 11] So, very provocative. It's saying, because Jesus is testifying to what he has seen, if you speak against that and deny Jesus' words, you're calling God a liar.

And we've seen over the past six weeks, again and again, who Jesus is, the things that he did. Evidence. So again, why doesn't everyone believe it?

Well, Jesus says, evidence isn't the problem. If you have a look with me at verse 19, this is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds are evil.

Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. I don't know whether you've ever had trouble with cockroaches.

Hopefully not. In my third year at university, in the sort of communal showers, we were getting cockroaches when you went in. And I went and complained to the porters.

[15:18] And I was told, yeah, there's not a lot we can do about that. It's because you live above the kitchens. So then I felt even worse about the cockroaches.

Anyway, cockroaches, when you turn on the light in the room you go in, they scurry away. We think of light and we think of safety and we're sometimes scared of the dark. Cockroaches fear light because it exposes them.

Well, Jesus has come as light to expose the darkness of our world. And without a work of God's spirit in our hearts, we don't welcome that exposure.

We don't want it in our lives. Here is sheer goodness, blazing purity, real weighty perfection. And we push it away because against that, it kind of shows that some of our cultural norms that no one else would think were wrong, like perhaps our pride and our greed, those things are exposed as deeply offensive to true goodness.

I don't know whether this is what you think. What do you think about this explanation of why people don't believe in Jesus? We might say it's because we're not convinced by the evidence. We might say, well look, I've read Richard Dawkins or I've read Sam Harris or Stephen Fry.

[16:38] I've been listening to Stephen Fry. We might say it's because of evolution or it's because of the dinosaurs or it's because of other religions. We sort of have these barriers to belief that we hold up.

But Jesus says the bottom line is we don't want to change. Deep down in our hearts we want to make up our own minds what's right and wrong. And the idea that Jesus would come in and bring truth from God that says actually your deeds are evil, that's a huge barrier to belief.

There was an atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel who intellectually at times would speak against belief in God but in a moment of amazing candor he talked about how he hates the idea of God. Let me, the quote's on the screen, let me read it for us. He said, I want atheism to be true and are made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.

It isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God. I don't want there to be a God.

[17:48] I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time.

That's an extraordinary thing to say. So scientism, reductionism, the idea of saying well because of what we know from science you should only believe what we can establish by science and that pointing people that we shouldn't believe in God.

Thomas Nagel is saying the reason why people do that is because we don't we have a cosmic authority problem. We don't want there to be a God who is concerned about how we live.

And it's good to remember that isn't it? If you're a Christian and you get unnerved by people around you not believing. We're such a minority in Glasgow today.

Very intelligent people who think that what you believe is bonkers. But Jesus says it's not their intelligence. It's a heart problem when we don't believe.

[18:52] I remember from working as a lawyer I worked on a trial and there was a point in the trial when there was a connection discovered between the judge and one of the witnesses on our side actually.

It was a bit awkward. They were members of the same gentleman's club in London. Typical. So what happens at that point is the other side starts considering do we need to bring in an application to ask the judge to recuse themselves?

The judge is deciding issues of fact in this case. Do they need to step back because they're connected in some way to a witness on one side? It's the same if you go for jury service and you get called into the room and then you realise you know the defendant.

You have to say that and you get struck off from that jury. Now it's not at that moment as though anybody thinks you're going to be really dishonest and deliberately lie or it's not that anyone thought that judge in the trial I was working on would deliberately decide in favour of his mate from the club. But it's that once you have that kind of connection in a trial that kind of conflict of interest it's really impossible to think objectively and clearly about a case when you're trying to work out truth and people you know are directly affected by it.

[20 : 10] It's impossible not to just rationalise what you want. Well I was talking to a guy on Friday who's not a Christian he'd been at the wedding and he said to me I guess in the end it just comes down to the resurrection doesn't it?

It comes down to whether or not you believe Jesus rose from the dead. And we more or less agreed on that that's right but I did also point out to him that as far as Jesus is concerned it's not just about evidence and him coming into our lives if we were part of a jury being asked to make the decision did Jesus rise from the dead we've got an enormous incentive to decide that no I don't think he really did it the evidence isn't strong enough because if he did rise from the dead and there is a cosmic authority over us we have a problem with that we would need to change so for any of us who are still weighing up the claims of Jesus we do still need to do that and the resurrection is a great place to go but also to keep asking ourselves if I don't believe is it that I can't believe it or is it that I won't believe it but there is hope at the end of that and it's in verse 21 just have a look at verse 21 there but whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God in other words there is another way to respond to the light of Jesus some people are drawn to it because we recognize if this is true the same truth that's deeply humbling to us as it exposes the darkness in our lives restores us and so if we're sincerely willing to search for the truth and we're willing therefore to step into this light we bring the way we've lived into that light and we find that as God says that we've lived wrongly he offers out to us the gift of eternal life and hope beyond the grave our guilt washed away so whether you're here this morning and you're a Christian but you wish you had more faith or you're here and you're not a Christian and you're thinking about Jesus the tonic the prescription is kind of the same really it's to spend time with the light would you commit to reading John's gospel again this week to look again at Jesus and search your heart and think am I being drawn into his light as so many people are the light of truth and goodness so we've thought about the surprising effect of belief how black and white it is and the surprising barrier to belief but how does believing affect an individual that's our final point the surprising joy of belief by now

Jesus has taken John the Baptist's disciples from him and he starts baptizing himself as well and so some people are starting to think well is John the Baptist going to be a bit miffed by all of this he's having his job stolen so in verse 26 they ask him about it verse 26 they came to John and said to him Rabbi that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan the one you testified about look he is baptizing and everyone is going to him and John knows that this has to be in verse 30 he says he must become greater I must become less but John isn't bothered at all that he's lost that starring role in verse 29 he says it's like being the best man at a wedding the bride belongs to the bridegroom the friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice that joy is mine and it is now complete so as we've said Stephen and Tanya got married here on Friday best man was called Michael not once did I see Michael sulking in the corner that it wasn't all about him he knew it was Stephen's day and he was loving that he had the privilege of being involved and so it is for John the Baptist and indeed for anyone willing to make it their life goal to point out Jesus to other people and this is a great piece of news for our kind of X Factor generation lots of us long for recognition you know we might not want to be on X Factor and to win that but we long for people to recognize us we long for perhaps people at work or people in our family or friends to look on us with approval and that would help us feel that our lives count for something but if that's your goal and you succeed it makes you a very proud person and if you fail it makes you a very miserable resentful person but when you get drawn into the light of Jesus and you've been rescued by him from eternal death into everlasting life you can completely change your life purpose you can long that it's him that's in the spotlight from now on you want him to have the glory and the honour knowing that you're so flawed you were perishing

without him and knowing that

God loved you enough to despite that to give him on the cross for you it gives you this kind of liberating humility so that just like John the Baptist you don't need it to be all about you anymore the writer Tim Keller has a great little book the freedom of self forgetfulness that the gospel brings he says this the Christian gospel is that I'm so flawed that Jesus had to die for me yet I'm so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me this leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time it undermines both swaggering and snivelling I cannot feel superior to anyone and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone I do not think more of myself nor less of myself instead I think of myself less and that's what we're seeing in John the Baptist the surprising joy of belief for all of his gifts for all of his following that's now at risk it doesn't matter he doesn't think much of himself doesn't think more of himself doesn't think less of himself he just he thinks of himself less because of Jesus and that joy is on offer to all of us we might deep down in our hearts resist the offer of this light coming into our lives but if we are willing to come into that light we find a whole new purpose in pointing people to Jesus and seeing him magnified for all that he has done for us the joy and freedom of self forgetfulness let's pray together heavenly father thank you that you gave your one and only son in love that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life

[27 : 36] Lord Jesus we praise you for the marvelous light of your words and your works for your willingness to step into our dark world knowing that the darkness would kill you help us more and more to respond rightly to your light not hiding away in darkness but resting in your truth and grace Holy Spirit we pray that you will give us humility that we might be willing to live in the truth about our own sin and the condemnation we deserve but also that we might have a greater grasp and awareness of the depths of your love taking us from the perishing giving us new birth forgiveness of sins and eternal life

Amen will be thanks to my good bye and I shall start and we pray and that in baby it so