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JOHN 3:16

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The Protestant Faith

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The most famous sentence in the English language is the Bible verse John 3:16. It has been translated into more languages of the world than any other sentence, and it has been learned by children at Sunday School as one of the first verses they ever learn. The reason is, of course, that this verse sums up in a nutshell the whole Christian gospel.

You will remember how it runs - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." It is only one sentence yet it has five verbs in it and each verb carries an important message. For example take the first, God loved. This leads us to the very centre of the nature of the world and of our existence; that God is a God of love. We have evidence of this everywhere; the beauty of the world in which God has put us; the fruits of the earth and all other good things of creation 'filling our hearts with joy and gladness'. The joys and pleasures of life are too numerous to list and the future joys which God has prepared for His children, the scriptures teach, excell our powers of imagination. God is a God of love. That is the first point in this verse.

But then there is another verb perish. An ugly word corresponding to an ugly truth. Mankind is perishing; you and I are perishing not only physically, we all know that, but spiritually and that is much more awful. It is true that most people don't realise this fact but it doesn't alter the matter. It's as though a person were asleep in a house that is catching on fire; the fact that he doesn't realise his situation, indeed he may be enjoying sweet dreams but if he doesn't wake up and escape, he will certainly perish. Our views about our future cannot affect the reality of the situation. Men and women, all of us, have turned away from God, they have followed their own hearts' desires, they are on the broad way, as Jesus said, and they will certainly perish everlastingly. Jesus' words are clear, the broad way leads to destruction and unless we get off it by turning back to God, we will finish up in the destination, without any exception.

But there is a third verb in this sentence which speaks about God giving His Son as Saviour. This action flows from the love of God "God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son ....." In God, love is always active, it is never merely an emotional attitude but it expresses itself in doing the thing which is needed. Our love must be the same. Love is action. To love God is to keep His commandments. The doing of His will is the love of God, according to St. John. So too, in this verse God's love is His giving what we needed. This is God's character always, that is why we can trust him to supply our needs. The supreme need for those who are perishing is someone who will rescue them from this fate. Jesus did this by undergoing himself the consequences of our turning from God, the consequences of death. He overcame every temptation to self-centredness and gave Himself freely to do the will of God, not turning aside even from death. His victory over all that in our lives brings about our perishing was complete and so He was vindicated by the resurrection, in this way showing that he has overcome death and sin and everything which would drag us down towards destruction.

The gospel is that God saves through Jesus those who are perishing. We for our part must believe the gospel, turn round and acknowledge Jesus as Lord, accepting Him as the Lord of our own lives. This response is pinpointed in the fourth verb in this sentence - whoever believes in Him shall not perish. Notice the wide scope of the gospel; everyone is included 'whoever believes in him'. To believe in Jesus is to recognise Him for what He is, the Lord to whom all power has been given in heaven and earth because He has triumphed over sin and death at Calvary. It is the invitation to all of us to put our faith in Christ if we have not done so already and to renew our faith in Him as Lord because this leads to the fifth verb - to those who believe in Christ as Lord God gives eternal life, they shall never perish and none shall pluck them out of the hands of their Saviour. God is life and those who are in fellowship with Him have life. God is eternal and nothing will separate us from Him if we put our faith in Jesus because all who believe in Him are forgiven their sins and are accepted into God's presence.

This experience of fellowship with God we begin to enjoy now, immediately we respond in faith to the gospel of Jesus as Lord. This fellowship is something which grows and will grow beyond death when we see Christ face to face. Then all sorrow and mourning will be a thing of the past; God Himself will dwell with His people and will wipe away every tear because sorrow is quite out of keeping with the joy of the heavenly fellowship.

People in the Old Testament had a feast called the Feast of Tents which they celebrated at the completion of the ingathering of the harvest; it was an out-of-door, barbeque and camping, a time of rejoicing, when sorrow or tears were out of keeping (Nehemiah 8:9, 17). This imagery is used to describe the future reality at the heavenly harvest, as it were, when God's purposes will be all completed, then too there will be the feast when God dwells with us because we have been brought into His presence through the forgiveness of Christ. Sorrow and tears will be things of the past, when God sets up his tents among ours (Rev. 21:3,4). This is eternal life. Heaven is people, heaven is friends, when we will have lively fellowship and friendship with God and with one another.

Thus, we have the whole gospel in John 3:16 with its five verbs; the love of God; the need of all of us who are perishing because of sin; the provision of God of the saviour, which is the index of His great love, He "so loved ... that He gave His only Son"; the promise that whoever believes on the son will not perish; the prospect of eternal life.

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