

For God so Loved... #2

Week 12 ~ Notes for May 22nd

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Background

This is a 'catch up' session to make sure we've done full justice to the stories in John 3 and 4 that we've been discussing for the last two weeks. Please refer back to Weeks [10](#) and [11](#) for the relevant texts and our previous discussion notes.

For this week's study I'd like to look at the implications of Jesus' actions in John 3 and 4.

Discussion

Take the stories of Nicodemus and of the woman at the well in Sychar and immerse them in their direct context *ie* back-to-back tales of Jesus dealing with some individuals. In the middle you'll find John 3:16-21 (from The Message bible)

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

"This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is."

We have spent some time looking at the usage of the word 'world' and remarking that these two stories include a senior figure in the Jewish world and a woman of no importance who, if being a woman wasn't bad enough, was also a Samaritan. So what does 'world' mean here? God so loved *what*, exactly?

Questions

On 'everyone goes to heaven'

There are two broad ideas for looking at law (I refer here to all notions of 'law', in both Christian and non-Christian contexts). The first says "All things are permitted unless specifically forbidden". The second might read "All things are forbidden unless specifically permitted".

How do you interpret vv17-20?

- Are you on God's side *unless* you actively seek 'the darkness'?
- Or, are you in 'the darkness' *unless* you actively seek God?
- What is the default position for a human on this planet? God's side or darkness?

On how best to organise yourself

Discussion concerning the woman of Sychar often concentrates on Jesus' ability and willingness to talk to those who are not part of the 'in' group. This is a common theme in the gospels. We, as 21st century Christians, then try and apply that to ourselves and our lives and our interactions with others. Frequently we want to 'bring others into the faith'. This may mean converting to a particular denomination; for most of us that would be Adventism. Equally, some in our group are fiercely critical of the established Adventist church and would wish to distance themselves from it. Somehow both viewpoints, the evangelists and the refuseniks, manage to co-exist.

- What do you think Jesus makes of the fact that there are some 30,000+ Christian denominations?
- What do *you* make of the fact that there are some 30,000+ Christian denominations?
- We discussed a little in [Part #1](#) of this study that Christ gives no doctrinal instruction to either Nicodemus or the Sychar woman.
 - Are we right to think that? Is the discussion with Nicodemus on being born again 'doctrine'? Or something else?
 - What part should doctrine have in meeting Jesus?

The prevailing 'progressive' view (as opposed to 'conservative' - please forgive the crude labelling!) runs something along the lines of 'love is more important than doctrine'. Which gets us into all sorts of trouble with other parts of the bible.

- If we really don't need to pay much attention to the nitty-gritty of our detailed behaviour then why are large parts of the Old Testament concerned with just such matters?
- Why does Paul tell off the Corinthians for what seems to be doctrinal points?
- How do you, personally, view 'love' and 'doctrine'? Is there a difference?

Let's say that we want to, for whatever reasons, remove ourselves from a strict loyalty to a denomination. How should we then organise ourselves?

- Without a centralised denominational system how would we run, say, ADRA?

- There are significant advantages to being part of a bigger like-minded group. List your top three or four advantages, as you see them.
- Similarly, what are the top three or four *disadvantages* of being in such a group?

It might be interesting to examine the reasons why a new denomination (or church) gets started. Usually, unless the issue is personal or family feuding, it's over a matter of doctrine. Rebecca Stott, in her excellent and somewhat chilling book "In the Days Of Rain" writes of being brought up in the Exclusive Brethren denomination, in Port Seton in the north of England in the 1970s. A recurring theme within the Brethren was doctrinal purity and the importance of shunning those deemed to be insufficiently pure. She writes of her long family history in the Brethren and tells of a rift between the 'Glantons' and others.

In this new large-scale rift, the Glanton sympathisers in Port Seton, held on to the red-tiled Meeting Room. The smaller number of hardliners, now calling themselves the London Brethren, took over the former Fishermen's Bethel on South Doors, a six-minute walk to the west. From satellite view on Google Maps it seems that this building had a grey-tiled roof. So there were now three Brethren Meeting Rooms in Port Seton, with blue-, red- and grey-tiled roofs.

All this excommunication was not just chillingly familiar to me - I'd watched the ministering brothers in our assembly suddenly turn on and expel once-respectable members of our fellowship - it was beginning to look like some kind of collective psychosis. The fact that there were three Brethren Meeting Rooms in this tiny fishing village was not just absurd, it was shameful.

How far should one go to ensure doctrinal purity? And should it ever come at the expense of personal relationships? As the WWJD wristbands ask - "What would Jesus do?"

The woman at Sychar could answer that question.

To close this session - Grace McCleen's review of Stott's book in The Guardian ends with this salutary warning:

But there was something that resonated deeply as I read "In the Days of Rain": the sense of being tortured by an inability to feel sufficiently sure of things one's very life depends on. Have I managed to "take the Lord into my heart"? the young Rebecca wonders; "Sometimes I'd be sure... then a day or two later He'd be gone again". When a friend's mother tells Stott "it was all right not to know" shortly after her family leave the Brethren, the idea astonishes her; not long after she experiences something like a conversion in a Catholic church, moved by the music and spectacle, where for "a moment" she "stopped striving to understand". The relief is seismic.

When every thought and impulse is given over to an infallible and omniscient Being, a person cannot develop an inner compass or uncensored emotions – a state that besides being agonising can also be fatal to one's sense of self. Getting to a place, subsequent to such an immersion, where it is all right not to know, then allowing oneself to be open to whatever emerges next, is, as Stott hints, an undertaking worthy of real devotion.