

3. John concluded his treatment of this episode with a summary that echoes Jesus' own words to Nicodemus (cf. 3:35-36 with 3:16-18). Scholars debate whether these closing verses of chapter three continue the Baptist's words to his disciples or are a summary commentary provided by John. The close parallel with verses 16-18 strongly suggests the latter; at the same time, these verses also fit well as closing out the Baptist's response to his disciples. In the end, one cannot be certain which view is correct; what is clear, however, is that John constructed and juxtaposed the two episodes of chapter three with an eye to his larger theme of "unbelieving belief" and the nature of authentic faith in Jesus the Messiah. This is evident from the accounts themselves, but also from the parallel summaries of verses 16-18 and 35-36 which connect them.

This observation is important because it draws attention to the fact that these statements dealing with salvation in relation to faith are situated within a particular context in accordance with a specific intent. This may seem obvious, but many (perhaps most) read these passages as if they are independent, proof-text articulations of the doctrine of "salvation by faith alone." But such a view effectively has John stepping aside from his contextual argumentation and goal to touch on a separate doctrinal topic. John's stated purpose in constructing his gospel account seems to argue against this, but, more significantly, this view leaves the reader without the proper frame of reference and context to grasp John's design and meaning in including these particular statements. John's intent here wasn't to articulate the doctrine of salvation by faith as such (or, more narrowly, "justification by faith"), but to further develop his theme of Israel's unbelief in her Messiah and the way it speaks to his larger thematic interests of light, life, truth and faith (cf. again 20:30-31 with John's prologue which sets the tone for his account). Some initial observations are in order:

- a. The first is John's contextual emphasis on Jesus' witness as His witness to Yahweh Himself (v. 34). And this testimony was comprehensive: Whether in His person, words or works, everything Jesus manifested to Israel testified to the One who sent Him. This truth is a constant refrain throughout John's account and his particular concern in highlighting it here was to illumine the true nature and significance of Israel's (and, by implication, all men's) unbelief: *Their assessment of Jesus and response to Him was their assessment and response to their God.*
 - Those in Israel who openly rejected and opposed Jesus did so with the conviction that they were honoring God and His Torah and demonstrating their devotion and faithfulness to Him. But the reality was just the opposite: Their "faith" was actually unbelief and their supposed devotion was disobedience (cf. Philippians 3:1-6; 1 Timothy 1:12-13).
 - But the same was true for many who embraced Jesus. Such ones "believed" in Him, but their faith was directed toward a messiah which they were led by their leaders to expect or which they imagined in their own minds. Their devotion, too, amounted to disobedience, for they were embracing the messiah they desired, not the one Yahweh had actually promised and now sent to them (ref. 2:23-25, 8:31ff; cf. Galatians 4:21ff).

Thus both groups were guilty of the disobedience of unbelief. This was overt and obvious in the case of Jesus' opponents, but it was no less true of many who embraced Him. The manifestations were opposite, but the underlying cause was the same (ref. 7:25-52, 9:24-41, 13:1-14:11; cf. Matthew 16:13-23, 20:1-28; also Mark 9:1-37; Luke 9:18-62).

- b. John emphasized that a person's response to Jesus is his response to God Himself, but not simply because the Father sent His Son on His behalf. John understood that the critical issue in this representation is the fact that Jesus is the embodiment of Yahweh and His will and work. *The Son testifies of the Father by being one with the Father.* And this oneness is mediated through the Spirit. Being the messianic Servant, Jesus is Man of the Spirit: man as animated, informed, and directed by Yahweh's Spirit. The man Jesus of Nazareth was one with His Father because His Father had given Him His Spirit without measure (cf. 3:24, 1:32-34; also Luke 3:21-4:21). In a very real and profound way, when the Son speaks, it is the Father speaking; when the Son acts, it is the Father doing His work. This is the significance of the Father giving all things to the Son, whether power, authority, judgment, and even life itself (cf. 5:17-30, 8:12-47, 10:22-38, 14:1-11, etc.).

The Father has given life to the Son – not just to possess it in Himself, but to bestow it upon whomever He pleases (cf. 1:3-4, 5:19-21, 6:30-36). And the Son grants this bestowment to those who embrace Him in faith; here, those who “believe in Him” (v. 36, cf. vv. 18-21, also 1:12-13).

4. These considerations are fundamental to John's discussion of “salvation by faith” and are part of the necessary framework for interacting with it. Far too often this doctrine (as many others) is treated as a matter of Christian dogma in isolation from its biblical context. But if one wishes to understand John's meaning, he must interpret John's statements within his larger argument and intent. And because John – as all of the gospel writers – sought to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah revealed in and promised by all the Scriptures, the Old Testament scriptures and their storyline provide the overall context for John's treatment of salvation by faith. The immediate context, then, viewed within its larger biblical framework, draws out the following emphases:

- a. The first is the parallelism which John assigned to the concepts of belief, obedience, eternal life and wrath. The parallelism here is *antithetic*, meaning that John set two entities in antithesis to one another. And he described two such pairs related in a cause/effect manner. The first antithetical pair is *belief* and *disobedience* and the second is *life* (eternal life) and *wrath*. Hence John's point:
 - Failure to believe is disobedience and this disobedience results in the unbeliever remaining under God's wrath without access to eternal life.
 - Conversely, belief is obedience which results in eternal life. And the antithesis between this life and wrath means that those possessing this life have been delivered from God's wrath.

Thus John was indicating that belief (faith) and obedience are, in some sense, synonymous (disobedience is being *unpersuaded*). This same synonymity doesn't apply to eternal life and removal of wrath, but the two concepts are nonetheless intimately related as inseparable and mutually interpreting.

b. These relationships and John's meaning become clear when considered within the larger biblical context. That context begins with the creation and fall narratives, and these establish the truth that, in its essence, sin is unbelief. Sin is "missing the mark," and the first three chapters of Genesis show that the intended mark is not a moral standard as such, but man's authentic and full conformity to the truth of his nature and role as divine image-son. This implies that sin is *relational violation* – in the first instance, man's violation of his relationship with his Creator-Father. Moreover, the fall account shows that this violation is a heart matter and only then a behavioral one. That is, it has its substance in a spirit of independence – a mind which operates independently of God. Because man is image-bearer created to be image-son, such independence amounts to a new definition of humanness; *it is man defining for himself who he is and what it means to live an authentic human life*. This independence doesn't necessitate atheism; it does, however, necessarily redefine a person's relationship with God, leaving him to script God into his personal narrative. Several implications follow:

- Sin is "missing the mark" of authentic humanness as humanness has its essence in man's relationship with God. Sin is man existing according to his own definition of himself and God and so also the relationship between them. This is the fundamental sense in which sin is unbelief.
- Sinful attitudes and actions (which embrace the biblical concepts of *iniquity* and *transgression*) are simply manifestations of sin, not the very essence of sin. They are the manifestation of people living according to their own definitions and determinations of truth, goodness, benefit, blessing, etc. Unbelief is the very essence of sin, so that all sinful conduct (attitudes, words, actions) has its ground and power in unbelief.
- Unbelief expresses independence and self-will and so fractures the innate relationship between God and the human creature created to be divine image-son. This relational alienation is fundamental and determinative, overflowing to encompass all other relationships: man with himself, with other people and with the creation he interacts with as image-lord.
- Human unbelief thus has cosmic significance; when the divine/human relationship is violated, every relationship within the created order is violated and vandalized, including the relationship between the Creator and His non-human creation. Man's unbelief brought him under the curse of alienation, desolation and death, but this same curse flowed from him to embrace the rest of the creation (Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 8:18-22).

These truths were introduced in the creation/fall narrative, but were subsequently illumined, developed and amplified through the Scripture's narration of Israel's history. Israel was Yahweh's "image-son" – a people appointed to bear His image before the world so that the knowledge of Him would fill the earth and all mankind would enter into the blessing of reconciliation and renewal. Israel – the Abrahamic seed – represented the beginning of God's work of renewal and ingathering and was His chosen instrument to bring this restoration to the entire creation, not simply the human race. In Israel, God would destroy the curse. But, like Adam, Israel failed its calling: It was an unfaithful (unbelieving) son who violated its covenant sonship; Israel's sin – its *lawlessness* – was relational infidelity. Zion was an adulteress who bore adulterous children for her Husband.

- c. John recognized that Jesus' presence and ministry had brought Israel's unbelief and rejection to its climax. The prophets had foretold this outcome, warning that the woeful consequences Israel endured in her history were but a foretaste of what was to come. The children of Israel were foolish to long for the day when Yahweh would arise against His enemies (the "Day of the Lord"), for they were among those enemies; for Israel as much as those who oppressed and subjugated them, that day would be a day of darkness, desolation and destruction (Amos 5:1-27).

Now Yahweh had returned to Zion to judge His enemies and liberate the captives in the new exodus. He'd visited His people in His Servant-Messiah, but they were poised to miss His visitation and so His delivering hand (cf. Luke 1:67-79, 13:22-30). The sons of Israel had chosen to embrace their own definition of themselves, their God and their relationship with Him; they disbelieved Him and He rewarded their disobedience with condemnation and destruction (Luke 19:28-20:18).

- d. These considerations, then, illumine the concept of God's *wrath* and the meaning of John's assertion that the wrath of God remains upon those who do not obey the Son (3:26). (Note that this is the only occurrence of this term in John's gospel.) Read in isolation, one could find John saying that deliverance from God's wrath depends upon obedience, which seems to contradict his previous assertion that belief is the ground of eternal life. Some seek resolution in distinguishing between justification and sanctification and noting the critical role that practical obedience plays in the Christian life. People get *saved* by believing in Jesus, but they get *sanctified* by obeying His commandments. Thus, to be a Christian one must believe *and* obey. (This is the premise behind the "lordship" controversy.)

But again, John wasn't providing his readers with an abstract doctrine of salvation as one would find in a statement of dogmatic theology. Specifically, he was again highlighting the true nature of Israel's unbelief and the disastrous consequences it would have for the covenant nation (cf. again 3:16-21). (Each of the four evangelists emphasized this dynamic, even as they recognized that Jesus came to Israel as the Messiah who embodied in Himself Yahweh's return to Zion in fulfillment of the Scriptures.) This narrow meaning, in turn, must frame the broader significance of verse 36 for the Christian doctrine of salvation.

And so, the question isn't whether or not John 3:36 supports the doctrine of salvation by faith (or justification by faith); it is clear that it does. *The important question is what does John's statement mean in its own context and how does it contribute to the Christian's understanding of salvation by faith and its implications for Christian living and witness?* Treated in context, this verse emphasizes the following truths:

- 1) The antithesis between belief and disobedience shows us that faith and obedience are two ways of referring to the same essential reality. This truth is reinforced by Jesus' summary at the close of His Galilee sermon where He defined lawlessness – disobedience to Torah – as not being known by Him, and therefore not knowing Him in truth as He really is (Matthew 7:21-27). He affirmed this same truth by His own life in which His obedience consisted in His uncompromised faith and faithfulness (cf. John 12:23-28 with Hebrews 11:1-12:2; also Romans 3:21-23; Galatians 2:15-20; Philippians 3:8-9). Finally, Paul made the same point in his epistle to the Romans, bookending his instruction with the phrase, the “obedience of faith” (1:1-5, 16:25-27). This phrase, in the first instance, means the obedience of coming to Christ in faith, but it more broadly denotes the life of faith and faithfulness that constitutes authentic obedience – the obedience of the True Man.

Therefore, faith isn't agreement with information or confidence of a certain outcome; it is the nature and orientation of an all-comprehending *relationship* with God in Christ by the Spirit; it is owning Jesus Christ as He really is and ordering one's life on the basis of who He is, what He's accomplished and what it means to be found in Him and share in His life and destiny as the Last Adam (cf. Romans 6-8; Galatians 3-6; Philippians 2-3; Colossians 1-3; 2 Timothy 2:8-14; etc.). This is the “obedience of faith” and its absence constitutes disobedience.

- 2) So the absence of faith – the disobedience of unbelief – leaves the offender under God's wrath. This concept of wrath, too, must be defined and understood in context. For many, wrath is a divine attribute which expresses God's indignation toward people who don't obey His laws and conform to His righteous standard. Deviation from demanded perfection provokes God's wrath and Jesus appeased that wrath by paying the price of human guilt on the cross. In this way, Jesus' atonement becomes an impersonal legal transaction involving the payment of a debt. And where Jesus' atoning work is viewed in this way, one is left with the two choices of *universalism* (universal salvation) or *limited atonement*.

The most obvious problem with this conception is that it overlooks the *cosmic* intent and scope of the atonement. Jesus' atonement is quintessentially universal in that it had its goal in a new heavens and earth. And pertaining to the whole creation, it pertains to the whole human race. The incarnation is irrefutable proof, for Jesus embodied Adamic man in Himself and that is the “mankind” He took to the cross. Thus unbelieving (disobedient) men abide under God's wrath, not because Jesus' atonement doesn't apply to them, but precisely because it does: They are liars who refuse to embrace the truth as it is in Christ – the truth openly attested in the Christ event (cf. 5:1-47, 8:31ff, 10:22-39, 15:18-25, 18:28-38).