

John 3:16-21

Intro:

This passage is an explanation, elaboration, and application of the topics discussed by Jesus in His conversation with Nicodemus, which was narrated in the previous passage (3:1-15). This passage elaborates on the reason and manner of the new birth and salvation mentioned by Jesus in the earlier passage.

It is debated, but this passage is probably not a continuation of that dialogue. In other words, this is likely not part of what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Rather, it is the Gospel writer's comment and explanation on that conversation. John the author regularly gives his own insight and explanation of events throughout this Gospel (e.g. 3:31-36), and this is most likely another example. I personally don't think it matters much whether these words were spoken by Jesus to Nicodemus and then recorded by John, or if they were inspired by Jesus as John was writing the Gospel. In either case, they are ultimately from God Himself. And by the way, those who think the words which Jesus spoke directly (sometimes printed in red letters) have more truth and authority than the rest of the Bible, they don't honor Jesus as much as they dishonor the rest of the Bible, which Jesus honored. To pride yourself in being a "red-letter" Christian just gives evidence that you don't really believe the red letters, because Jesus Himself expressed a very high view of Scripture, and said that all Scripture is true and should be heeded.

I. God gave His Son to save those who believe in Him (16-18)

A. God has given His Son to save (16-17)

1. For God loved the world in this certain way (16a)

Verse 16 is one of the best-known verses in the entire Bible, and for good reason. This verse summarizes God sending Jesus so that we may experience His salvation.

This verse starts with the word "for," clearly demonstrating that this is an explanation of the previous passage.

The main idea in this verse is that God loved the world. The term "world" can have a range of meanings, and the precise meaning often changes throughout this book. In this verse, "the world" has two main emphases. The first is that God's love and salvation extends beyond just the nation of Israel. God is the God of the entire world, not just one part of it. So, the salvation described to Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, does not just apply to Jewish leaders, or even to the whole Jewish nation. It applies to the entire world. But the primary emphasis when John says that God loved the world is that the world is not deserving of His love. "The world" in this passage refers to sinful humanity in rebellion against God. The focus is not on the bigness of the world as much as on the badness.

This is the first occurrence of the term "love" in the Gospel of John. The meaning of this term must be determined by how John used it, without importing ideas about love from our culture or experience. It is easy to misunderstand God's love by romanticizing it and thinking that it is natural and necessary for God to love this world. The reality is just the opposite. Because of the wickedness of fallen humanity, the world is not lovable. And therefore, God's love for the world is not a natural expectation. Rather, it is a supernatural miracle based only on God's gracious character and will. God didn't have to love the world. But He did! It is great news that God's love does not depend on our being good and earning His favor. And God's love for the world should not be defined by the love we have, or even by our loftiest ideas about what love could be. God's love should be understood from God's own revelation about His love. That is why John included the word "so," which I have expanded as, "in this certain way." John stated that God loved the world in the way defined and described by what he will say in the rest of this passage (and book) – that God's love was costly; that God paid a great price to make a way to pour out His love on the sinful world, while still upholding His perfect justice and holiness; that God gave His Son to bring salvation to a world that did not deserve it.

2. The Result: He gave His Son to save the world (16b-17)

a He gave His Son so that those who believe are saved (16b-d)

1) That He gave the one and only Son (16b)

This proposition begins to describe the result of God loving the world. God gave His Son. He *gave!* This is a gift of pure grace. Again, this was not necessary. God was under no compulsion outside of His own character and will. It was a purely voluntary gift. And it was a costly gift – the life of His one and only Son.

The term translated “one and only” is the same term used in John 1:14 and 18. This word is sometimes translated “only begotten,” but it has absolutely no connotation that Jesus came into being at any time. It simply means that Jesus is one of a kind. He is completely unique. The Bible may speak of people becoming children of God, but Jesus is the Son of God in a way that no one else will ever be. There never has been, nor ever will be One like Him.

And Jesus is God’s Son in the way that was described in chapter 1, and will be elaborated throughout the Gospel of John. He is like God, because He is God. He and the Father are One. But the Son is not the Father. This again points to the doctrine of the Trinity – that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all One God in three persons. The Father is God. The Son is God. But the Father is distinguishable from the Son and the Spirit. And as an expression of His love for the world, The Father send His Son for purposes which will be described in the next propositions.

2) Purpose: Everyone who believes is saved (16c-d)

God’s purpose in giving His Son was twofold (one positive and one negative), according to these propositions: so that His people would not experience eternal death through perishing, and so that they would experience eternal life through salvation and participation in His Kingdom.

a) Neg: So that everyone believing in Him shall not perish (16c)

This proposition is the negative portion of the purpose John gave for God sending His Son. Throughout this passage, there are contrasts showing both the negative and the positive sides of statements in order to give the entire truth. This proposition introduces the general subject(s) of both sides of this contrast, which is not repeated, but assumed in the next proposition.

The subject of these two propositions is “everyone believing in Him.” In this context, the term “everyone” was probably intended to indicate that this is not limited just to Israel. It is open to all humanity, not just Jews. It is limited to those who believe in Jesus, the Son of God. But it describes absolutely everyone of whom this is legitimately true.

Sometimes this phrase is translated “whosoever believes” (e.g. KJV). That is a decent translation, but runs the risk of being misunderstood. This is because of a longstanding theological debate about the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human ability in salvation. The argument addresses the extent and nature of God’s prior planning and influence (if any) on an individual believing in Christ. And because the word “whosoever” seems to imply randomness, uncertainty and lack of influence, one side of this debate sometimes uses this verse to argue for their side. However, the words John wrote are literally, “every one believing.” This narrows the subject to those who believe, but says nothing about the way they came to believe or any influences that led to their belief. In other words, this verse is ambiguous on this topic and does not argue for either side of this particular debate, and therefore should not be used in it. There are Bible passages that are very relevant to this debate, but this is not one of them. And this passage has so much to say on its own; we should hear what it says on its own terms. Believing in Christ is a key theme of John’s Gospel, even *the* key theme. This is highlighted in John’s purpose statement for the entire Gospel (20:31). Throughout John

(and the rest of the Bible) we learn that genuine faith includes a few aspects. Faith includes knowledge, belief, and trust, and it involves our intellect, will, and affections. Faith requires at least some level of knowledge, that is, an awareness and understanding of the things claimed. This is a necessary prerequisite to believing, because belief always has an object. We believe in something. It is not necessary to have all knowledge, exhaustive knowledge, in order to believe. But there is a level of knowledge of the truth necessary in order to genuinely, sufficiently believe. But knowledge by itself is not believing in the Biblical sense. Biblical faith also involves believing, sometimes called “assent.” This means to recognize the truth and be persuaded that it is true and valid and important. And this is a level of certainty based on evidence. Faith is not a leap in the dark; it is based on sufficient reasons. It may not have all the evidence and answer to every question. But it has sufficient evidence in order to be convinced of its validity. Because Biblical faith is a conviction and connection with a person, it may not know absolutely everything about that person (Christ), but it knows enough to be convinced that certain things are true, and that this person will reliably act in certain ways and do certain things. And that brings up the third, and most central part of Biblical faith, which is trust. This includes knowledge and assent, but is much more. It is living out of the confidence of one’s beliefs. It is belief that is strong enough to actually govern our thoughts and behavior. This can be contrasted with the fact that many people (and even the devils) know the truth – they know it to be true, but they still don’t care. They have not grasped the importance, relevance, and immediacy of the truth to the point that it makes a difference to them. Biblical faith is trust in a person to the point that we live out our confidence in Him, which determines the direction and delight of our soul. It is trust focused on a person, that results in subjection to Christ as our Lord, and dependence on Christ as our savior. Notice that John did not write “believe Him” as in just believe what He said. But he wrote “believe in Him,” that is, put your trust in Him personally. And because of all this, it is not the strength of our faith that matters as much as its object. So, we should not worry about how strongly we believe, as much as we concentrate on Whom we believe in. If you want your faith to grow, don’t look at yourself, concentrating on your activity of believing. But look at Christ – Who He is and what He has done. And throughout this book, John contrasts genuine trust in Jesus as the Messiah (Christ) and Son of God with what I call “sign faith” (e.g. 2:23-3:3) and “food faith” (e.g. 6:25-40).

And the result of genuine belief in Jesus, which John here states is part of the purpose of God giving His Son, is that this person will not perish. The term “perish” is a strong word, which points to the complete destruction of eternal death. John does not define this word any more precisely in this proposition, but it is contrasted with eternal life in the next. And it is parallel with being judged/condemned in vv. 17-18.

b) Pos: **But have eternal life (16d)**

This proposition shows the positive side of God’s purpose in giving His Only Son. This is the counterpart to the previous proposition. That one stated what will *not* happen to those who believe. This one states what *will* happen. The subject “everyone believing in Him” is not restated in this proposition, but can legitimately be assumed from the previous one. No one would have eternal life if God had not love the world and sent His Son.

Those who believe in Christ will have eternal life. The concept of eternal life is a key theme throughout John’s Gospel, as introduced in v. 15. Throughout this book, John communicates the characteristics of this kind of life and how it can be experienced. It is

life, as contrasted with death, especially the death denoted by the word “perish” in the previous proposition. And it is life characterized by being “eternal.” This does not just mean that it lasts forever, but it is the kind of life appropriate for the next age that Jewish believers of that time were awaiting. It is the life of the promised Kingdom of God (see vv. 3, 5). It is life to the full (10:10). And this life is defined by Knowing God and Christ (17:3). This is a tremendous gift of grace, that God would send His own Son, so that we could experience this kind of life.

b Elaboration: He sent His Son for the purpose of saving those who believe (17)

This verse is an elaboration an interpretation of what John had said in 16b-d. He basically restated the same thing in a different way in order to explain it more completely. It begins with the word “for,” which in this verse signifies an explanatory comment.

1) Neg: He did not send Him to condemn (17a-b)

Just like 16c, these propositions give the negative purpose (what was *not* the purpose) for God sending His Son. And like in 16c-d, these propositions are put in contrast to the positive purpose, which will be stated in 17c-d

a) For God did not send the Son into the world (17a)

The word “send” in this verse partly defines what John meant by the word “give” in v. 16. Part of what it means that God gave His Son is that He sent Him into the world. Jesus being sent from God is a major theme of John’s Gospel. And the word “not” signals the negation of the purpose for His sending. It does not negate the fact that God sent the Son. But in the context of the next proposition, it states what is *not* the purpose of this sending. The word “not” is emphasized by its position in this sentence. And the Son was sent “into the world.” This is also a part of the theme of Jesus being sent, which we have seen explicitly highlighted in John’s prologue (1:1-18). Jesus was sent to the same world which was mentioned in v. 16 as the object of God’s love. God’s expression of His love is His Son. And the world here still has the connotation of those who are not deserving of His love, and who are resistant to His love as well as being resistant to His Son. But God still sent His only Son to those who resist His love and grace, because His love is stronger than our resistance.

b) Purpose: So that He may condemn the world (17b)

This is the continuation of the negative purpose. This is *not* why God sent the Son. “Condemn” is in parallel with “perish” in verse 16. So, to be condemned is to perish, and to perish is to be condemned. This is a legal/judicial word which means to come under judgement of any kind. But here, it obviously refers to negative judgement of guilt and liability to punishment, as well as referring to the carrying out of this punishment. God did not send His Son in order to pronounce sentence and carry out judgment on the world. The fact is that the world was already under the sentence of judgment and liable to punishment before Jesus came. God did not need to send Jesus to condemn the world, the world was already condemned. And the time for fully executing the sentence had not yet come. Before that time will come, God sent His Son to rescue people from that sentence (as stated in the following propositions). Jesus did not come to be the world’s executioner. Rather, He came to be our Savior, as John will next declare.

2) Pos: He sent His Son to save (17c-d)

These propositions are the positive counterpart to 17a-b, giving the positive purpose for God sending His Son.

a) But [He sent His Son] (17c)

This proposition is not explicitly stated, but is clearly implied by the structure of John's argument, and by the word "but." The previous sentence stated that God did *not* send His Son for that purpose. Now this statement gives the positive alternative. God *did* send the Son for this other purpose (stated in the next proposition). This negative/positive kind of contrast occurs four times in this short passage.

b) Purpose: So that the world may be saved through Him (17d)

Now John stated the positive purpose for which God sent His Son. This is still parallel to v. 16, and so, elaborates and further defines "eternal life" in 16d. God sent the Son so that the world may be saved. So, being saved is equated with having eternal life. And this is the opposite of being condemned and perishing. However, John did not say that the world will be saved. He said that they may be saved. This means that the salvation is not automatic. It is contingent. And in context, we learn that only the portion of the world that believes in Christ will experience this salvation. We should be careful to not push this contingency so far as to think it possible that none will be saved. For saving those who believe is God's expressed purpose for sending His Son. And this makes sense in this proposition, because John stated that we are saved "through Him." That means that without Him, the world will not be saved. But through Him, those who believe *will* be saved.

B. Implication: those who believe in the Son are saved, those who don't are condemned (18)

This verse tells the implication, the logical result of what was stated in the previous verses. This verse contains another clear positive/negative contrast, which is mutually defining with those that have gone before. These truths may seem elementary for people who have been Christian for a long time, or raised in a Christian culture. But they are profound, and life changing, if we only take them to heart. That is why John is using repetition and hammering the same kind of foundational truths: to believe leads to salvation and life, but not to believe leads to condemnation and death. There are only two possible outcomes, two possible ultimate destinies. And each person will inevitably experience one and only one of them. And the two are so absolutely opposite, with one being unimaginably wonderful, and one being unimaginably horrible. Therefore, it is important for every human to take this extremely seriously, and to do all they can to experience the better outcome. And John has clearly given us the simple way to do so, using the word "believe," which is used three times in this one verse. This is all the logical conclusion from what John had previously stated.

1. Pos: The one believing in Him is not condemned (18a)

"The one believing in Him" is the same phrase used in v. 16, except this verse does not have the word "every." However, it can be assumed that this also applies to everyone who genuinely believes. And the word "condemned" is the same word used in v. 17 in the phrase "condemn the world." It still has the meaning of judicial verdict and the resulting punishment. But, of course, in this verse, it is negated – those who believe will *not* experience this punishment, which is described as "perishing" and contrasted with "salvation" and "eternal life." By negatively highlighting what believers will not experience, John clearly stated the graciously given benefit of avoiding the nastiest consequences for our sin (see also Rom. 8:1). But he also implicitly drew attention to the positive benefits mentioned earlier as well. However, in the rest of this passage, the emphasis is more on the negative consequences to be avoided, as a motivation John gave his readers to believe in Christ.

2. Neg: Those who don't believe are condemned (18b-c)

a The one not believing has already been condemned (18b)

This is obviously the negative contrast to the previous proposition. "The one not believing" is the same term as in the previous proposition with the addition of "not." And this person is said to already be in the state of having been judged/condemned, using the same term as 17b and 18a. This is a present reality and not just a future possibility. And in v. 36, John stressed that God's wrath remains on them. This person is condemned because of sin, because the guilt of sin is the default condition of fallen humanity. But here John stressed that they are also condemned because of unbelief, which will be amplified in the next proposition.

b Reason: because he has not believed in the Name of the one and only Son of God (18c)

This proposition gives the reason for the previous one. The reason those who don't believe are condemned is that they did not believe. They are doubly condemned, not only because of the guilt of their sin, but now also because they have rejected God's gracious rescue from their sin and guilt. They were in a state of condemnation before they refused to believe in the Son of God. But their unbelief cemented them in their condemnation. The word "believe" is the same as used earlier. And believing in His Name is a phrase John used to signify belief in Christ (1:12, 2:23). And those who believe have life in His name (20:31). The word "name" means more than just the title by which we call someone. It stands for the entire person and all His characteristics. So, to believe in His Name means to trust in the person of Jesus and all that He is and has done. The term "one and only" is the same term used above in v. 16, with the same meaning. And in the phrase "Son of God," is the same term "Son" is used in the previous two verses, all referring to Jesus. Except in this phrase, it is made explicit (which was assumed in the earlier uses) that He is the Son of God Himself, by adding the phrase "of God." John repeated many ideas here that he had used earlier, because this proposition is a logical summary of what he had been communicating.

II. The justice of God condemning those who do not believe (19-21)

Verses 19-21 are further explanation and elaboration of what John wrote in the previous three verses. Specifically, these verses elaborate on the term translated "condemnation" or "judgment," giving further reasons, which show the justness of God in condemning those who do not believe. God displays His grace and love in saving those who believe. But God is not unjust in condemning those who do not.

A. This is the judgment/verdict/reason for condemnation (19a)

This proposition serves to introduce the further discussion of the concept of condemnation introduced in the earlier verses. As mentioned earlier, this is a legal term that can refer to the process of judging, to the verdict (either innocent or guilty), and any recompense or punishment as the result of this verdict. In this context, this refers almost certainly to a negative verdict and the resulting punishment. It may be (as in Romans 1:21, 24, 26, 28) that people loving darkness is part of God's judgment on them. He has blinded them and given them over to their sin. And, in the context of what follows, this word also has the connotation of the reasons for the guilty verdict – the justification for the condemnation and punishment. The term "this" refers to what is described in the remainder of verses 19-21.

B. Specifically: Evil men love darkness more than light (19b-21)

The rest of this passage states the specifics describing what John called the "condemnation" in the previous proposition. It is introduced with the word "that," connecting it with the previous proposition as the definition and elaboration of the word "this" in 19a.

1. Light came from God, but evil people preferred darkness to light (19b-e)

This section echoes what we saw in 1:4-5, 9-11 – that true light from God had come into the world with the incarnation, but the world rejected the light from God, which was a symbol for Jesus and all that He brought.

a That the Light came into the world (19b)

This proposition points back to what John wrote in chapter 1. There Jesus was identified as the light from God (see also 8:12, 9:5), Who was the Life, and was shining in the darkness. And John also said that the light was coming into the world, but was rejected by the world. Here John is again bringing up these truths as the foundational explanation for God's condemnation of the unbelieving world. This also reinforces the meaning of the term "world" not only as the planet, or even humanity as a whole, but primarily emphasizing "the world" as sinful humanity in rebellion against God.

b Evil people loved darkness rather than light (19c-e)

1) People loved darkness instead of the light (19c-d)

a) And men rather loved the darkness (19c)

Here John used the term "men/people/humanity" interchangeably with the term "world" which he used earlier. This is a neutral term, but in this context it takes on the connotation of fallenness and sinfulness typically associated with "world" because of the actions of people described in this proposition.

This also echoes chapter 1, especially vv. 10-11. The response of humanity to the light coming into their midst was not a reasonable response. Rather than loving the Light, Who had given them life, and Who now was granting eternal life to those who believe, they rejected the light in favor of darkness. Their rejection of the love of God was caused by a greater love of something else, which will be further elaborated in the following propositions. As throughout the Bible, believing falsehood is more often connected with moral failure, refusing to believe the truth, than with ignorance or innocent intellectual miscalculation.

Darkness, as throughout John's Gospel, is the opposite to the Light, which represents Christ and all that is good. It is the contrast between creation life and non-creation chaos. But the emphasis is more on the moral sphere, where light = goodness, and darkness = evil, with the result that Light brings life and truth, and darkness brings death and hides the truth.

b) Instead of the light (19d)

This obviously brings in the contrasting alternative to loving the darkness. Humanity's love of the darkness is shown to be even more wicked, vile, and stupid when we are reminded of what we gave up in favor of the darkness. Like Paul wrote in Romans, we have traded the glory of the immortal God for images. We have exchanged the truth for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the creator (Rom. 1:23-25).

2) Reason: For their deeds were evil (19e)

The reason John gave for humanity preferring darkness to light was because our deeds were evil. Our hatred of the light and preference for darkness comes from our fallen human nature and our fallen human actions. John will elaborate on this connection in verses 20-21. We know naturally that our deeds, our actions, are the result of our will and affections. We do what we want to do. We act upon what we delight in. So, our evil deeds come from a will and affections that have been twisted to prefer darkness because of our innate selfishness and pride. The rest of the Bible confirms this diagnosis that humanity is fallen and our default is to prefer sin and darkness. And this natural sinfulness is not an excuse for our sin. Rather, John here uses it as prime evidence that our condemnation is justified. We deserve condemnation because of our evil actions, which are the result of our fallen nature. We need a Savior.

2. Explanation for why people love darkness and hate the light (20-21)

In this section, John explains why people have the insane response of preferring darkness over light. It has to do with our natural preference for hiding our sin rather than confessing it. We don't want our sin to be known, and so we hide, deceive, and make excuses. This section also divides humanity into two types: those who cling to the darkness, hiding their sin, and those who come to the light by believing in Jesus. This is similar to the two responses to the light that John described in 1:10-13.

a Neg: The one doing evil is ashamed to come to the light (20)

1) For everyone practicing morally substandard things hates the light (20a)

This proposition uses a construction similar to "everyone believing in Him" (16c). But in this case, it is "everyone doing bad things." "Bad" or "morally substandard" things is a blanket term for anything that is low-grade, that is substandard and base. Just like many quality products are labeled as "grade-A" and substandard products are considered "low-grade" by comparison. So, this term is used of the moral sphere to label acts that are substandard, and so considered evil or worthless. These same deeds were called "evil" in 19e. And in many cultures, people are considered "low-class" precisely because they do these kinds of deeds. This term assumes there is an objective standard of morality. And, in the Bible, God's commands and character are the standard by which we should determine what is high grade and what is low grade. Here John states that all those who do these kinds of things hate the light. And he'll go on in the next propositions to elaborate how they express their hatred of the light as well as the reason behind that hatred.

2) He avoids the light to keep his shameful deeds secret (20b-c)

a) And he does not come toward the light (20b)

The response of those who hate the light is to avoid the light, to run away from contact with the light. We have all observed someone (and probably, at one time or another been this person) who didn't want to talk about God, didn't want to think about God, didn't want anything to do with God. They adamantly refused to go there, because something about God made them extremely uncomfortable. It is almost like they had an allergic reaction to God. John shows that this is a clear symptom of a guilty conscience because of sin, and the resulting hatred of the light. We would rather distract ourselves and bury our head in the sand and avoid the concept of God, because to come to the light is too frightening of a possibility, and we will do all sort of things to avoid it.

It is important to realize that the enmity and avoidance is all one-sided. This proposition assumes a legitimate opportunity to come to the light, but a refusal to come. Nothing is keeping this person from the light but their own hatred of the light. God is not hiding His light, and as a matter of fact, no one would overcome this hatred of the light, if God had not loved the world and taken the initiative and sent the Light to us.

b) Purpose: so that His deeds will not be exposed (20c)

This proposition gives the reason why people hate the light and the purpose why they avoid the light. This is because the light will expose their morally substandard deeds. We all, at one time, have been like roaches that scatter and hide whenever the light comes too close. The term “exposed” means to be shown to be what they actually are. It is to give an accurate assessment of our morally substandard deeds as being worthless and evil. This term also has a connotation of rebuke, correction, and challenge to do better. And “his deeds” obviously refers to the morally substandard deeds mentioned in 20a. The reason this person does not want their deeds exposed is partly because of their selfish pride, reflected in shame over their worthless deeds. No one likes to be exposed as a failure or as morally base and wicked. That is an extremely painful admission, and shame is a powerful emotional motivation to hide. But this person avoids the light also because they don’t want to stop doing their worthless deeds. If their deeds are exposed by the light, they will be pressured to stop those wicked deeds, which deeds they secretly love and don’t want to give up. People avoid the light because they love darkness and the deeds of darkness. People reject Christ because they love sin. And the only way to overcome sin is to be captured by the truth that Jesus is better than any sin. The way to be freed from slavery to sin is to become a love slave of Christ.

b Pos: The one doing the truth is not ashamed to come to the light (21)

This verse is the positive contrast to the previous verse. The one doing the truth is contrasted with the one practicing morally substandard deeds. And the response of hating and avoiding the light is contrasted with coming toward the light. The one described in this verse comes to the light both because they have no cause for shame, but primarily because of a love for the light (Christ).

1) But the one doing the truth comes toward the light (21a)

Here John used a different word “doing” than the word “practicing” that he used in 20a. These two words are somewhat interchangeable. But if there is a difference of emphasis, “doing” focuses on the object and end product of the activity, while “practicing” focuses on the activity itself. And “practicing” has more of an emphasis on the ongoing nature of the activity. These same words are contrasted in 5:29 in a similar construction with similar meaning. And John contrasted the truth with morally substandard deeds. Truth is a theme throughout John’s Gospel, and always has reference to the character of God/Christ. The one doing the truth therefore, is living in conformity with Christ and His character. Notice also that “truth” is singular and “morally substandard deeds” is plural. There are many possible ways to do evil. But there is only one true way. Similarly, in Galatians chapter 5, the evil deeds of the flesh are plural, but the fruit of the Spirit is singular (with many words used to describe the one thing). And obviously coming to the light is contrasted with hating and avoiding the light, as described in the previous verse. In John’s Gospel, coming to the light is equated with believing in Jesus, as opposed to rejecting Him. To come to the light is to believe in Christ, in the manner described above, and which John elaborates throughout this book.

2) Purpose: to show that his deeds honor God (21b-c)

a) So that his deeds may be revealed (21b)

This proposition is parallel to 20c in that it gives the positive reason for this person coming to the light and the purpose for him doing so. Notice the contrast between his deeds being “revealed” with the morally substandard deeds being “exposed” in 20c. “Revealed” is a general word for making something known, usually in an intentional way. In other words, the person wants the information to become public knowledge, which is the opposite of “exposed.” And “exposed” has a connotation of negative evaluation and resulting shame, which is not present in this proposition. However, John used the same term for “deeds” as he did in 20c. In that verse, the bad deeds were exposed. In this verse, the good deeds are revealed. In both cases, the deeds are shown to be what they are: in one case, the deeds are bad, causing shame and rebuke, and in this verse, the deeds are good, with no need for shame. The one described in this verse purposely wants his deeds to be made known. But, as we’ll see in the next proposition, John does not say that this is for personal pride and recognition. The one who truly comes to the light has a higher motive.

b) Specifically: that they are having been accomplished in/by God (21c)

This proposition elaborates more specifically exactly what about this person’s deeds are revealed – that God had His hand in them. It is not so much shown that this person did good deeds, or even the precise nature of these good deeds. It is revealed that these deeds (described in 21a as “doing the truth”) had been accomplished with reference to God Himself. The Bible is clear that God is the ultimate author and cause of all good things (e.g. Rom. 11:36). And God gets the ultimate credit for the deeds of the one who comes to the light.

“Having been accomplished” is a general term for carrying out something by work or effort, to bring about a result. It describes this person’s works – they were accomplished, they were done. And the way they were done is “in/by God.” This phrase may mean that they were ultimately done by God, emphasizing that God was the ultimate cause of the good deeds. Or it could mean that they were done “in God,” making some sort of connection with them being done under the influence of God, in the sphere of God’s working. Or possibly this means done with reference to God, i.e. with God in mind. In any case, this person coming to the light shows that ultimately God was involved in their good deeds, and God gets the glory in their lives and even in their conversion.

Summary:

This passage confirms and explains that the new birth described in the previous passage (3:1-15) is a supernatural gift that ultimately comes from God. And the only way that we can experience it is through believing in His Son. This can happen because God, in His love, sent His Son to the world in order to purchase and provide this new birth. And that leaves all of humanity with only two possibilities: either believe in Christ and thereby experience the new birth and eternal life, or refuse to believe in Christ and experience the just condemnation of eternal death. This condemnation is just because people prefer sin and darkness to the gracious gift of the light in Christ. John’s purpose in writing all this was so that his readers would humbly turn from the darkness, look to the light of Christ, believe and be saved, just as the ancient Israelites looked to the bronze snake and were healed (see vv. 14-15).