

## 160 A bridge too far – John 3:16

But John<sup>[159]</sup> came back to me...

*In answer to your question about what Jesus says about punishment or penalty for sin, what about John 3:16-18? What is your interpretation of Jesus' forthright 'condemnation' of unbelievers?*

OK, sorry, I missed that passage because I only did word searches for 'punish' and 'penalty'.

Before we look at that passage, let's remind ourselves of a general principle: when we read a passage, we have to interpret it in light of the rest of the Bible. In other words, when we read any given Bible passage, we 'read' it (i.e. we interpret it) in terms of the general way we see the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

The 'traditional' view of the Bible (certainly in the second millennium, and especially after the Reformation) has been in terms of crime (sin) and punishment (penalty), but the thing that has transformed my life is learning to see the Bible through the lens of God's overwhelming desire to **restore** all humankind.

So could what Jesus says in John 3 fit with my newer reading?

Well, maybe we *could* interpret 'condemnation' in John 3 in terms of punishment, but if it's the *only* occurrence of that idea in Jesus' teaching, then we would need to be really sure of our interpretation. To see it in terms of God punishing us, would be going against the grain of the rest of Jesus' teaching.<sup>[159]</sup>

OK, let's see...

*16 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.*

If we choose not to believe, then we are cutting ourselves off from the source of (eternal) life, so yes, we will perish, but God isn't *causing* us to perish – God wants us to believe and receive.

*17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

Exactly so, God doesn't *want* to condemn anyone; God wants to restore the world.

*18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

Now here's the nearest we get to the sin/penalty 'stands condemned' reasoning. Doesn't this imply 'condemned by God'?

No, I don't think so: if we *choose* not to believe, we are cutting ourselves off from the source of life, so we 'stand condemned' in the sense that we are condemning ourselves to death.

I don't think I have distorted the meaning of the text, have I? But if we're thinking in terms of sin/penalty we read it one way, but if we're looking for restoration, there it is. And that's why I'm so excited in my faith.

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