

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

NRSV

We have certainly heard these very famous words for today. There is a special reason why they were selected. First they are important theologically for us. But also **TONIGHT** we will begin a new **ONLINE ZOOM** Bible Study group with friends who are even out of state, and tomorrow night, on Monday night we will begin again with an in-person group meeting here at the church. *And* Monday mornings we study together at Nelson. It has been 18 years since I last had 3 different groups going at once. But I like it! We are not trying to make up for lost time, because we did not lose time. *It was different time.* But hopefully we were wise and kept in the game, every day, in the last 14 months.

So today there is a simple title: ***Why We Study.*** Why We Study. To me, that phrase or question is shocking, that anyone would ever ask such a thing. BTW, the word **DISCIPLE** literally means to be a student, one who learns. We study because that is how we learn and grow; and living without learning and growing is not a good thing. We are designed to learn and grow. And, we have this Bible, which technically has 31,102 verses

within. Do we suppose there might be some learning in 31,000 verses of sacred writings? We are only looking at 8 verses today, even though we tend to short-cut things, so that there is really one verse in there that most people think means the most. BTW, don't short-cut yourself. The Bible was not written to be abbreviated. Because of this we cannot take these particular 8 verses and say that really all we need to know is one of them, # 16. And yet that is what people do. I would almost bet that as you heard the other parts of this passage, it might have been a bit unsettling. What is this about Moses lifting a snake on a stick? But let's take a moment to do some study. If people want to abbreviate the Bible, and reduce things to one verse, then let's take a closer look at that one verse, # 16, and we shall see what we shall see. OK?

We Americans actually have more Bible versions than any other people in the world. No other people have more. And I cannot help but mention what I have been told by people in churches for decades. If the question is raised "*Well, which of these versions is the best?*" people will often respond by saying the best one is the one that ***they like the best!*** So the best is a matter of personal preference? *Why do we study?* Hopefully to come up with a better answer than personal preference! We should know something else in our land: The making of Bibles is actually a very big business. And please know this: the average American family has 9 Bibles in their home! NINE! Enough about that for now.

We have a serious verse to explore right now, one that is quoted in different ways, put on posters and T-shirts, held up on signs at football games, all of the above. And yet when we look more carefully, we see that even this verse shows up in different ways. So let's take some looks here;

We have the version we used this morning, from what is called the NRSV. I think it is a well-done Bible from about 1990. Again, here we see John 3.16 saying to us

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him **may not perish** but **may have** eternal life.*

Let me make a lot of Junior High English teachers very happy here by stating that VERBS matter! Verbs are the action words, normally. They tell us WHAT happens, and almost always they tell us WHEN things happen. We can see with this verse that *God loved*, and *God gave*, so that others *may not* perish but *may have* eternal life. Please notice those MAY words. When exactly will these things happen? Well, it is complicated. Now we can see our old friend King James:

*...that whosoever believeth in him **should** not perish, but have everlasting life.*

This version tells us that believers *should* not perish, and instead *have* life with God. OK. We have heard those words before. But is there a question about the *timing* of things? King James says that people "should not perish." Should not? When is that happening? Again, it is complicated. Let's look at one more that many people know, that being the NIV:

...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

OK. This one says “shall not,” and I think we can agree that the word *shall* is like the word *will*, meaning that this is talking about the future. I would bet that some of you are thinking right now *Well, he is being really picky about nothing today! What does it matter?* OK. What does it matter? Well, whenever you study the Bible, and you see a verse that seems to have differences, you should take a closer look. And, this is talking about something very important. This is the verse that everyone wants to quote and put on bumper stickers. If it is that important, shouldn't we try to get it right? If it is that important, we should certainly try to get it right.

This is why we study. And this is why some of us are fortunate and get to learn NT Greek. Because when we can read the original words, we see things that we do not normally do in English. Not all languages behave the same way. Especially in the Gospel of John, that writer uses lots of what are called present subjunctive verbs. These are crucially important if we want to get to the heart of this writer's message. Did you notice what he told us in the big passage? **18** *Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.* Whoa! Condemned already? Isn't he talking about the future? Apparently not! He seems to be talking about RIGHT NOW. And technically, that is exactly what these words are doing. They are talking about right now.

Let me offer you my best translation from the original words in the original language, and you can see that it is a bit different: *God loved the broken human order so much that he gave his only Son in order that whoever actively trusts in this Son/love/gift is not in destruction or self-destruction but has life with God now.* Please trust me that I would not suggest anything other than what it says more deeply. This version of what it says is much more focussed on right now, and not the future. And yet we usually think that what we often call Salvation is only about the future. That is a misunderstanding, at least for the Gospel of John. All I can tell you is that this particular book is very concerned about our lives **RIGHT NOW**, and he talks that way all through the book. Every day we have to decide: *do I believe that God loves our broken world, and that God has in fact given his Son for the sins of the world, once and for all? Do I trust in this, and really believe it?* This writer says that if we do, something wonderful will happen: we will no longer be in despair, we will no longer be in self-destruction, something which lots of people do. We will have life with God, as it will be in the future. But it doesn't start then: it starts now. But sadly the destruction starts now as well.

Why do we study? Because we should try to squeeze every drop of special meaning out of these words that we say we believe. Do we realize that 50% of Americans cannot name the first book of the Bible, nor can they name the 4 Gospels? They can tell you what coffees they have at the coffee shop! We Americans are interesting. We say we believe in this book we call the Bible. Lots of families buy a new one every year, even

though the other ones were not worn out. Why do we study? So that we can grow and learn, and deepen the faith that is within us, which hopefully will be passed on LaDor VaDor, from generation to generation. If the adults do not understand, what chance do the children have? So when we have the chance to study and learn our faith, do we do it? Or do we spend our days with eyes on a screen, binge-watching the latest shows? Why do we study? We are starting some new groups tonight and tomorrow (although we will not meet at Nelson because of their rummage sale). If you would like to be involved, contact me. Or find another group led by someone else. That is just as good.

Why do we study? Because a famous Bible verse actually seems to have much more to say than we had been told. I have to end with song lyrics from Fiddler on the Roof! Tevya sings these beautiful words in **If I Were a Rich Man**:

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray. And maybe have a seat by the Eastern Wall. And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all.

Why do we study? Why not? Let's take advantage of the sweetest thing of all. AMEN.