

## John: 3:17–21

### From Catena Aurea:

16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

17. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

18. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** Having said, Even so must the Son of man be lifted up, alluding to His death; lest His hearer should be cast down by His words, forming some human notion of Him, and thinking of His death as an evil<sup>1</sup>, He corrects this by saying, that He who was given up to death was the Son of God, and that His death would be the source of life eternal; So God loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life; as if He said, Marvel not that I must be lifted up, that you may be saved: for so it seemeth good to the Father, who hath so loved you, that He hath given His Son to suffer for ungrateful and careless servants. The text, God so loved the world, shews intensity of love. For great indeed and infinite is the distance between the two. He who is without end, or beginning of existence, Infinite Greatness, loved those who were of earth and ashes, creatures laden with sins innumerable. And the act which springs from the love is equally indicative of its vastness. For God gave not a servant, or an Angel, or an Archangel, but His Son. Again, had He had many sons, and given one, this would have been a very great gift; but now He hath given His Only Begotten Son.

**HILARY.** (vi. de Trin. c. 40) If it were only a creature given up for the sake of a creature, such a poor and insignificant loss were no great evidence of love. They must be precious things which prove our love, great things must evidence its greatness. God, in love to the world, gave His Son, not an adopted Son, but His own, even His Only Begotten. Here is proper Sonship, birth, truth: no creation, no adoption, no lie: here is the test of love and charity, that God sent His own and only begotten Son to save the world.

**THEOPHYLACT.** (in loc.) As He said above, that the Son of man came down from heaven, not meaning that His flesh did come down from heaven, on account of the unity of person in Christ, attributing to man what

belonged to God: so now conversely what belongs to man, he assigns to God the Word. The Son of God was impassible; but being one in respect of person with man, who was passible, the Son is said to be given up to death; inasmuch as He truly suffered, not in His own nature, but in His own flesh. From this death follows an exceeding great and incomprehensible benefit: viz. that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. The Old Testament promised to those who obeyed it, length of days: the Gospel promises life eternal, and imperishable.

**AUGUSTINE.** (Tr. xii. c. 12) For why is He called the Saviour of the world, but because He saves the world? The physician, so far as his will is concerned, heals the sick. If the sick despises or will not observe the directions of the physician, he destroys himself.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. xxviii. 1) Because however He says this, slothful men in the multitude of their sins, and excess of carelessness, abuse God's mercy, and say, There is no hell, no punishment; God remits us all our sins. But let us remember, that there are two advents of Christ; one past, the other to come. The former was, not to judge but to pardon us: the latter will be, not to pardon but to judge us. It is of the former that He says, I have not come to judge the world. Because He is merciful, instead of judgment, He grants an internal remission of all sins by baptism; and even after baptism opens to us the door of repentance, which had He not done all had been lost; for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23) Afterwards, however, there follows something about the punishment of unbelievers, to warn us against flattering ourselves that we can sin with impunity. Of the unbeliever He says, 'he is judged already.'—But first He says, He that believeth on Him is not judged. He who believeth, He says, not who enquires. But what if his life be impure? Paul very strongly declares that such are not believers: They confess, he says, that they know God, but in works deny Him. (Tit. 1:16) That is to say, Such will not be judged for their belief, but will receive a heavy punishment for their works, though unbelief will not be charged against them.

**AUGUSTINE.** (Tr. xii. c. 12) What didst thou expect Him to say of him who believed not, except that he is condemned. Yet mark His words: He that believeth not is condemned already. The Judgment hath not appeared, but it is already given. For the Lord knows who are His; who are awaiting the crown, and who the fire.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. xxviii. 1) Or the meaning is, that disbelief itself is the punishment of the impenitent: inasmuch as that is to be without light, and to be without light is of itself the greatest punishment. Or He is announcing what is to be. Though a murderer be not yet sentenced by the Judge, still his crime has

already condemned him. In like manner he who believes not, is dead, even as Adam, on the day that he ate of the tree, died.

**AUGUSTINE.** (de Pecc. mer. et Rem. l. 1. c. 33) Where then do we place baptized children? Amongst those who believe? This is acquired for them by the virtue of the Sacrament, and the pledges of the sponsors. And by this same rule we reckon those who are not baptized, among those who believe not.

3:19–21

19. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

20. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

21. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. xxviii. 2) As if He said, So far from their having sought for it, or laboured to find it light itself hath come to them, and they have refused to admit it; Men loved darkness rather than light. Thus He leaves them no excuse. He came to rescue them from darkness, and bring them to light; who can pity him who does not choose to approach the light when it comes unto him?

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. xxviii. 2) Then because it seemed incredible that man should prefer light to darkness, he gives the reason of the infatuation, viz. that their deeds were evil. And indeed had He come to Judgment, there had been some reason for not receiving Him; for he who is conscious of his crimes, naturally avoids the judge. But criminals are glad to meet one who brings them pardon. And therefore it might have been expected that men conscious of their sins would have gone to meet Christ, as many indeed did; for the publicans and sinners came and sat down with Jesus. But the greater part being too cowardly to undergo the toils of virtue for righteousness' sake, persisted in their wickedness to the last; of whom our Lord says, Every one that doeth evil, hateth the light. He speaks of those who choose to remain in their wickedness.

**AUGUSTINE.** (Conf. l. x. c. xxiii. [34.]) Because they dislike being deceived, and like to deceive, they love light for discovering herself, and hate her for discovering them. Wherefore it shall be their punishment, that she shall manifest them against their will, and herself not be manifest unto them. They love the

brightness of truth, they hate her discrimination; and therefore it follows, Neither cometh to the light, that his deeds should be reprov'd.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. xxvii. 2) No one reprov's a Pagan, because his own practice agrees with the character of his gods; his life is in accordance with his doctrines. But a Christian who lives in wickedness all must condemn. If there are any Gentiles whose life is good, I know them not. But are there not Gentiles? it may be asked. For do not tell me of the naturally amiable and honest; this is not virtue. But shew me one who has strong passions, and lives with wisdom. You cannot. For if the announcement of a kingdom, and the threats of hell, and other inducements, hardly keep men virtuous when they are so, such calls will hardly rouse them to the attainment of virtue in the first instance. Pagans, if they do produce any thing which looks well, do it for vain-glory's sake, and will therefore at the same time, if they can escape notice, gratify their evil desires as well. And what profit is a man's sobriety and decency of conduct, if he is the slave of vain-glory? The slave of vain-glory is no less a sinner than a fornicator; nay, sins oftener, and more grievously. However, even supposing there are some few Gentiles of good lives, the exceptions so rare do not affect my argument.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. xxviii. 3) He does not say this of those who are brought up under the Gospel, but of those who are converted to the true faith from Paganism or Judaism. He shews that no one will leave a false religion for the true faith, till he first resolve to follow a right course of life.

**AUGUSTINE.** (de Pecc. mer. et Remiss. l. i. c. 33) He calls the works of him who comes to the light, wrought in God; meaning that his justification is attributable not to his own merits, but to God's grace.

**AUGUSTINE.** (Tr. xii. 13, 14) But if God hath discovered all men's works to be evil, how is it that any have done the truth, and come to the light, i. e. to Christ? Now what He saith is, that they loved darkness rather than light; He lays the stress upon that. Many have loved their sins, many have confessed them. God accuseth thy sins; if thou accuse them too, thou art joined to God. Thou must hate thine own work, and love the work of God in thee. The beginning of good works, is the confession of evil works, and then thou doest the truth: not soothing, not flattering thyself. And thou art come to the light, because this very sin in thee, which displeaseth thee, would not displease thee, did not God shine upon thee, and His truth shew it unto thee. And let those even who have sinned only by word or thought, or who have only exceeded in things allowable, do the truth, by making confession, and come to the light by performing good works. For little sins, if suffered to accumulate, become mortal. Little drops swell the river: little grains of sand become an heap, which presses and weighs down. The sea coming in by little and little,

unless it be pumped out, sinks the vessel. And what is to pump out, but by good works, mourning, fasting, giving and forgiving, to provide against our sins overwhelming us?

### **From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:**

#### **3:17 God Sent His Son Not to Condemn but to Save**

##### **Resisting the Physician's Help.**

Augustine: As far as it lies in the power of the physician, he has come to heal the sick. Whoever does not observe his orders destroys himself.... Why would he be called the Savior of the world unless he saves the world? Tractates on the Gospel of John 12.12.

##### **Two Advents: Pardon and Judgment.**

Chrysostom: Many of the more careless sort, using the loving kindness of God to increase the magnitude of their sins and the excess of their disregard, speak in this way, saying: There is no hell, no future punishment. God forgives all our sins....

But let us remember that there are two advents of Christ, one past, the other to come. The first was not to judge but to pardon us. The second will be not to pardon but to judge us. It is of the first that he says, "I have not come to judge the world but to save the world." But of the second he says, "When the Son shall come in the glory of his Father, he will set the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left." And the sheep will go into life and the goats into eternal punishment.... But because he is merciful, for a time he pardons instead of judging. For if he had judged immediately, everyone would have been rushed into perdition, for "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Don't you see the unspeakable surplus of his loving kindness? Homilies on the Gospel of John 28.1.

### **3:18 Those Who Do Not Believe Are Condemned Already**

#### **There Is No Need to Judge Believers.**

Hilary of Poitiers: "He who believes," says Christ, "is not judged." And is there any need to judge a believer? Judgment arises out of ambiguity, and where ambiguity ceases, there is no call for trial and judgment. And so, not even unbelievers need to be judged, because there is no doubt about their being unbelievers. But after exempting believers and unbelievers alike from judgment, the Lord added a case for judgment of the human agents on whom it must be exercised. For there are some who stand midway between the godly and the ungodly, having affinities to both but strictly belonging to neither class, because they have come to be what they are by a combination of the two.... For many are kept within the pale of the church by the fear of God, yet they are tempted all the while to worldly faults by the allurements of the world. They pray, because they are afraid; they sin, because it is their will.... These, then, are they whom the judgment awaits that unbelievers have already had passed on them and believers do not need. Homily on Psalm 1.21–22.

#### **Disbelief Itself Is the Punishment.**

Chrysostom: He either means that disbelief itself is the punishment of the impenitent, insofar as being impenitent is to be without light, and to be without light is of itself the greatest punishment. Or he is announcing beforehand what is to be. Even if a murderer is not yet sentenced by the judge, still his crime has already condemned him. In the same way, he who does not believe is dead, even as Adam, on the day that he ate of the tree, died. Homilies on the Gospel of John 28.1.

#### **Sins and Transgressions in Our Own Power.**

Clement of Alexandria: The prophet says with justification, "The ungodly are not so, but as the chaff that the wind drives away from the face of the earth. And so, the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment" because they are already condemned since "those who do not believe are condemned already." "Nor do sinners sit in the counsel of the righteous," inasmuch as they too are already condemned and are not united to those who have lived without stumbling. "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous; and the way of the ungodly shall perish." Again, the Lord clearly shows sins and transgression to be in our own power. Stromateis 2.15.

### **Separation from God Is Self-Inflicted.**

Irenaeus: Separation from God is death, and separation from light is darkness. Separation from God consists in the loss of all the benefits that he has in store.... This is the same thing that happens in the case of a flood of light: those who have blinded themselves or have been blinded by others are forever deprived of the enjoyment of light. It is not that the light has inflicted on them the penalty of blindness, but it is that the blindness itself has brought calamity on them. Therefore the Lord declared, "He who believes in me is not condemned," that is, he is not separated from God, for he is united to God through faith. On the other hand, he says, "He who believes not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God," that is, he has separated himself from God by his own doing. Against Heresies 5.27.2.

### **3:19 Condemnation of Those Who Love Darkness**

#### **The Light Comes to Them, but They Refuse.**

Chrysostom: They are punished because they would not leave the darkness and hurry to the light.... Had I come to demand an accounting of their deeds, they might have been able to say that was the reason they stayed away. But now I have come to free them from the darkness and to bring them to the light. Who can pity the person who does not choose to approach the light when it comes to him but would rather remain in the darkness? Homilies on the Gospel of John 28.2.

#### **The Power to Determine Our Own Punishment.**

Cyril of Alexandria: Jesus says that unbelievers had the opportunity to be illuminated but preferred to remain in darkness. Such people, in fact, by failing to choose enlightenment, determine their own punishment against themselves and provoke their own suffering, which was in their power to escape. God preserved human freedom so that people might justly receive praise for good things and punishment for the contrary. As indeed he shows in another place, saying, "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword." Commentary on the Gospel of John 2.1.

### **Choosing to Remain in Wickedness.**

Chrysostom: Then, because it seemed incredible that someone should prefer the light to darkness, he gives the reason for the infatuation, that is, that their deeds were evil.... Indeed, if he had come for judgment, there would have at least been a reason for not receiving him because one who is conscious of his crimes naturally avoids the judge. But criminals practically run to meet one who brings them pardon. Therefore, it might have been expected that those who are conscious of their sins would have gone to meet Christ, as many indeed did. Publicans and sinners came and sat down with Jesus.... But the majority was too cowardly to undergo the work of virtue for righteousness' sake, and they persisted in their wickedness to the end.... They are always doing evil and looking for ways to roll around in the mire of sin, with no desire to subject themselves to my laws. Homilies on the Gospel of John 28.2.

### **3:20 Evildoers Hate the Light**

#### **Love-Hate Relationship with the Truth.**

Augustine: People love truth when it shines on them and hate it when it rebukes them. For, because they are not willing to be deceived but definitely want to practice the art of deception, they love truth when it reveals itself and hate it when it reveals them. Because of this, truth shall requite them in such a way that those who were unwilling to be discovered by it are not only discovered by it against their will but also without revealing itself to them. This is the way the human mind, so blind and sick, so base and unseemly, desires to lie concealed but still not wanting anything to be concealed from it. Instead, it receives quite the opposite—not only is it not concealed from the truth, but the truth is concealed from it. Yet, even while it is as wretched as that, it still ultimately prefers to rejoice in truth rather than in falsehood. It looks forward to the day when, without any further trouble intervening, it will rejoice in that one truth by whom everything else is true. Confessions 10.23.34.

#### **Those Infatuated with Wickedness Hate the Light.**

Chrysostom: He said this about those who choose to remain in wickedness all the time. He indeed came so that he might forgive our former sins and secure them against those sins to come. But since there are some so relaxed, so powerless when it comes to virtue that they remain infatuated with wickedness until their dying breath, he reflects here on these kinds of people. For since, he says, the profession of Christianity requires a sound way of life besides right doctrine, they are afraid to come over to us because



they would rather not have to live a righteous life. On the other hand, no one can blame a heathen because, with the kinds of gods he has and the foul and ridiculous rites that go along with those gods, his actions suit his doctrines. But those who belong to the true God, if they live a careless life, everyone will call them to account and accuse them. Even its enemies admire its truth. Observe, then, how exactly Jesus lays out what he is saying. His expression is not “the one who has done evil does not come to the light” but “the one who does it all the time, who desires always to roll himself in the mire of sin—this is the one who will not subject himself to my laws but chooses to stay outside and commit fornication without fear and do all kinds of other forbidden things. For if he comes to me, the light exposes him as a thief, which is why he avoids my dominion.” Homilies on the Gospel of John 28.2.

### **3:21 That Their Deeds May Be Known**

#### **Not One’s Own Merits.**

Augustine: He declares that the works of the one who comes to the light are wrought in God, because he is quite aware that his justification results from no merits of his own but from the grace of God. On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins and on Infant Baptism 1.62.

#### **Hate Your Own Work; Love the Work of God in You.**

Augustine: But if God has discovered everyone’s works to be evil, how is it that any have done the truth and come to the light?... Now what [Jesus] said is that they “loved darkness rather than light.” He lays the emphasis on that. Many have loved their sins. Many also have confessed them.... God accuses your sins, and if you accuse them too, you are joined to God.... You must hate your own work and love the work of God in you. And when your own deeds begin to displease you, that is when your good works begin as you begin to find fault with your evil works. The beginning of good works is the confession of evil works, and then you do the truth and come to the light. How do you do the truth? You do not soothe or flatter yourself or say, “I am righteous,” while in actuality you are unrighteous. This is how you begin to do the truth. You come to the light so that your works may be shown to originate in God. And you have come to the light because this very sin in you, which displeases you, would not displease you if God did not shine on you and his truth show it to you. But the one who loves his sin, even after being admonished, hates the light admonishing him and flees from it so that his works that he loves may not be proved to be evil.... For little sins, if allowed to accumulate, lead to death. Little drops swell the river. Little grains of sand become a

heap that presses and weighs down. The sea coming in little by little, unless it is pumped out, sinks the ship. And what does it mean “to pump out,” except that you do good works, mourn, fast, give and forgive so that sins do not overwhelm you? Tractates on the Gospel of John 12.13–14.