

Trinity College of the Bible

**John's Warning to Forsake the Things of the World**

Main Assignment

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NT 315: Readings in the Johannine Literature

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*John's Warning to Forsake the Things of the World*

*Lose My Soul* is the name of a Christian song that was released by Toby Mac in 2008. For some, the most memorable line in the song is: "I don't want to gain the whole world, and lose my soul." The rest of the song touches on rising above the temptations of this world. A little less than two millennia prior, the Apostle John warned his congregants of the eternal consequences when one loves the world and all it encapsulates above God.

In 1 John 2:15-17<sup>1</sup>, he writes:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

In this passage, *the world* is ὁ κόσμος in Koine Greek. The meaning is thus: "the ungodly multitude; the whole mass of men alienated from God, and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ," or "the whole circle of earthly goods, endowments, riches, advantages, pleasures, etc, which although hollow and frail and fleeting, stir desire, seduce one from God and are obstacles to the cause of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Based on this definition of *the world*, John's warning is explicit. But what does he mean when he says that one cannot *love* the things of this world more than God? According to the commentary of R.C.H. Lenski, "John uses ἀγαπᾶν, the love that indicates direction of the will and intelligent, purposeful choice, and not φιλεῖν, which is used to denote natural, friendly affection."<sup>3</sup>

Although John's instruction is cut and dry, people will always struggle with this. Those who have not accepted Christ make the free will choice to live in the world, but this warning is specifically given to Christians. According to Lenski:

It is useless to urge those who are still of the world not to love the world. We can never hope to pluck figs from thistles or grapes from thorns. Only when people have

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible (esv)* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 2385.

<sup>2</sup> "G2889 - kosmos - Strong's Greek Lexicon (esv)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed 14 Sep, 2023. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g2889/esv/mgnt/0-1/>

<sup>3</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 423.

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overcome the wicked one, know the Father, know the Son, have the remission of sins, can we admonish them as John here.<sup>4</sup>

Purging oneself of worldly ideologies will be a never-ending process in one's life with Christ. The gospel message warns its recipients of the consequences that ensue when one lives a life that caters to their own flesh and its sinful nature as opposed to fleeing from it. Paul writes in Galatians 5:19-21:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup>

However, *the world* that John is referring to isn't solely composed of the spiritual warfare that one experiences or the desire to engage in sinful acts. For some, their fleshly cravings revolve around material possessions. There are many things that are of the world that would be exceptionally painful to lose, such as one's home, vehicle, job, children, family, or the comforts they have grown accustomed to. There is nothing wrong with loving one's family or wanting to make enough money to live comfortably. Parents are even *commanded* to care for children who are in their charge. However, if a person, ideology, opinion, or object takes precedence over God and separates them from Christ, they will be destroyed.

From Paul's list in Galatians 5 come sins that lead to generations of worldly people plagued with brokenness, trauma, pain, anger, and hatred. If one chooses this path, one will pass away, along with the world. For example, Sodom and Gomorrah were judged and destroyed for their wickedness (Genesis 19:23-29) as well as the tribes that inhabited the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 20:16-18). The sins of Egypt were many. The pharaohs kept the Hebrews as slaves for generations and murdered their children. Their culture was riddled with wickedness,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible (esv)*, 2175.

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and they were judged harshly for their sins against the LORD. They endured plague after plague (Exodus 7:14-12:42) before their army was swallowed by the Red Sea (Exodus 14:26-31). The rich man in Matthew 19:16-22 valued his wealth above the pursuit of Christ.

John's warning seems simple enough, but it is made harder to heed because of the tempter and his minions. Satan knows exactly how enticing the sin of pride and self-exaltation is, as this is how he himself fell. Isaiah (14:11-15) records:

Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, the sound of your harps; maggots are laid as a bed beneath you and worms are your covers. How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God. I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.<sup>6</sup>

This is how Lucifer tempted Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:1-6), how he attempted to bring about Christ's downfall in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), and how he tempts humans today. He is well aware that enticing humans with the pride of life is a tried and true method that will lead one to the same destruction he faces. Many who were initially proponents of Christ and God the Father were ensnared by this evil desire to undermine God and pridefully pursue knowledge or spiritual enlightenment apart from him.

In regard to religion, he has undoubtedly led many astray with the pride of life by imparting them with extra-biblical "divine knowledge". For example, the third-century theologian, Hippolytus, noticed the unnerving similarities between John's juxtaposition and that of his Gnostic opponents: "The earliest commentaries on John were written by Gnostics."<sup>7</sup> *The Gospel of Truth*, penned by second-century Egyptian Gnostic, Valentinus, parallels John's writings. His protege, Heracleon, penned a full Gnostic commentary of the Gospel of John,

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible (esv)*, 1178.

<sup>7</sup> Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within its Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 413.

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showing that his writings were welcomed and embraced in their circles.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this is why the orthodox church was wary of accepting John's gospel and second-century writers exhibited a lack of interest in it.

This can be seen through the ages; Muhammad of Islam and Joseph Smith of the Mormon Church both claimed to have been given visions from God. This pride is why there are many who claim to be able to offer communication between the spirits of the deceased and their loved ones who are very much alive. The pride of life and cravings of the flesh is where the mega-church mentality has stemmed from, as well as the New Age movement that is currently sweeping the American church at present. Many have observed this, such as Michael Horton:

We come to church, it seems, less to be transformed by the Good News than to celebrate our own transformation and to receive fresh marching orders for transforming ourselves and our world. Rather than being swept into God's new world, we come to church to find out how we can make God relevant to the "real world" that the New Testament identifies as the one that is actually fading away.<sup>9</sup>

Not only does God judge sin and punish it in individual communities or people groups, but he promises that all sin will one day be judged, eradicated, and punished at the consummation of all things (Revelation 20:11-15, 2 Corinthians 5:10). The passing away of this sin-riddled world is imminent; the things of this world cannot compare to all that comes from God.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:16-18).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2008), 19.

<sup>10</sup> MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible (esv)*, 2335.

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The only good that exists in this evil world is that which comes from God, the father of lights. This is true for all of humanity, not just for those who are his children. Some manner of his providential grace is extended to all. “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45).”<sup>11</sup> This is the Christian God, the one, true, living God. He demands obedience and righteousness from those who have accepted him but allows the ones who reject him to benefit from his goodness while they live out their lives on earth.

However, there is a clear separation between the world and those who have received salvation through Christ in verse 17. Only those who adhere to his will may abide in him forever. There are many warnings and reminders throughout the New Testament that pertain to the world passing away and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom in heaven and on a new, revived world (Revelation 21). He will reign in the hearts of his followers forevermore. His kingdom will be everlasting and universal (Revelation 22). Christ will reign over the whole earth from Jerusalem, as promised to Israel (Isaiah 2:1-4; 9:6-7).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1685.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Volume Four: Church & Last Things* (Bloomington, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2005), 497.

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