

"God So Loved the World"

John 3:16 is one of the best known verses in the Bible. Anyone have it memorized? Let's try the King James Version: "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."

Remember when people would hold up "John 3:16" signs at football games? I heard of a man who actually had his name changed to *John Threesixteen*. Martin Luther called John 3:16 the "gospel in miniature". And it is!

Let's look at this marvelous verse: ***God so loved the world.*** *God loved.* The God revealed in the Bible is a God of love. Not just some "cosmic force", or an impersonal Supreme Being, but One who is invested in His creation, and in fact *loves* the people He has created! God loved this foolish, blundering, evil infested, rebellious world. Martin Luther looked at humanity and said, "If I were as our Lord God, and these vile people were as disobedient as they are, I would knock the world to pieces."

God loves *the world* – that means everyone. Someone has said: "No one in all the world could possibly love everyone in the world. In fact, most people find it hard to love all their relatives." A pastor was talking to some children about the things that money can't buy. He said, "Money can't buy laughter, and it can't buy love." Then to drive home his point, he asked, "What would you do if I offered you a thousand dollars to not love your mother and father?" Stunned silence followed, but finally a little voice asked, "How much would you give me to not love my big sister?"

There is no human being who is not loved by God! Democrats – that means God loves Donald Trump, and Mitch McConnell, and Lindsey Graham. Republicans – God loves Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer and Bernie Sanders. God loves Tucker Carlson and Joy Behar and Bill Maher. Andrew Cuomo, and Howard Stern. God loves your best friend. And the people you can't stand. *God so loved the world.*

Yet, God's love is not mushy sentimentalism. We distort God's character when we portray God as some soft, spineless sugar daddy who looks at our sinfulness and rebellion and weakly mutters, "Oh, that's all right." God's love manifests itself in mercy and kindness, but also in holiness and judgment.

When John writes, "God so *loved* the world", the word used in the original Greek is the verb form of the word "agape". Agape is one of 4 Greek words for love. It's not a *warm feeling* kind of love, but an *act of the will*: acting for the good of someone else even if you don't feel like it, or know they don't deserve it. It's much like a parent who really loves their child, who may not always feel warm and fuzzy towards that son or daughter, but will set boundaries, hold their children accountable for their actions, and at times exercise tough love. *God's love is not mere mushy sentimentalism.*

John 3:16 continues: ***God so loved the world that he gave his only (begotten) Son.*** If you have a son or daughter, would you be willing to give up your child for someone else? Would you let

your son or daughter die for the benefit of another? Especially for someone you didn't like, or someone who mistreated or harmed you? Yet God did that.

The original word for "only begotten" is "mon-o-gen-es." "Mono" means "one," and "genes" is where we get words like "genetics." The point here is that Jesus and God the Father share the same DNA, so to speak. So, in a sense, giving up His Son was God giving up a huge part of *Himself* for us!

Ages ago the Lord God Almighty called a special executive meeting of the heavenly council. It was a Who's Who of the great saints of the Old Testament, an All-Star roster. As the group settled around the throne of God they could sense something of great importance was about to unfold. The Great One spoke: "I've tried various means to get wayward earthlings to turn from their rebellious ways (as you know), yet nothing seems to turn the tide. They still seem to love themselves and their sins more than they love Me. I've just about exhausted the possibilities. However, there is one more thing..."

There was a holy hush as the heavenly council members glanced at each other, searching for clues. Moses, after a while, dared to break the silence: "Master, send someone like me. True, the Israelites often didn't listen to the commandments You gave me, but we humans did make great progress through Your giving us the Law." "I will send someone like you," the Lord God answered. "The One I send will indeed be a prophet like Moses."

Now Elijah found the courage to speak to the Lord of all creation: "Lord, I am willing to go back to earth and turn the hearts of people to You." "Now Elijah, you know it's against the rules to go back to earth a second time. But listen, I am sending someone who will be named John, who will truly be another Elijah, and this man John will prepare the way for the One I intend to send."

By now a great suspense was building among the council members. The angel Gabriel was there in that elite gathering. Bowing before the throne, Gabriel pleaded: "Let me go to earth, Master. Certainly if your earthly creatures are visited by an angel they'll turn from their foolishness and seek more holy lives." "Gabriel," the God of the ages replied, "I *am* sending you! But you're not going to be the main event! You will only prepare a select few for what is to come. And oh, by the way, be sure and tell the angelic chorus to practice hard, because they're going to be needed for some singing when the Event happens that I'm planning!"

King David simply could not hold back his curiosity any longer. "O Lord God, what is it you are going to do to lift your created ones out of their evil ways? How are you going to save them from destroying the good life You gave them?" With that, the face of God seemed to soften, and it was almost like a sadness crept through the brightness and glory of God's countenance. "I am going to send my Son," He said. "My only Son...in fact, David, He will be recognized as a descendant of yours, one who will establish a kingdom likened to the golden days of your reign as king."

By now a collective gasp filled the council chambers. "No!" some cried out! "Not Your beloved Son. He is holy and pure, without sin." "Yes," the Father said. "Perhaps they will listen to Him and turn back to Me."

So, it wasn't long before the Father, with great tenderness, embraced His Son and sent Him on His mission. Incredibly, mysteriously, He made the journey into time and space and found His place in the womb of a young girl. Her name was Mary."

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish. The Bible says that we can ignore or reject God's Son and His love, and set ourselves up for God's judgment. "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. 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... whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath (John 3:18-19,36).

God's love is not a weak and indulgent thing that allows us to do what we please with no adverse consequences. God's love is a holy love that calls forth a response of faith and obedience. I love what someone has said. He said if all John the Baptist said to Herod was "God loves you", he wouldn't have been beheaded. But John confronted Herod's sins!

God has offered us the gift of salvation in Christ. Forgiveness of all our sins. Reconciliation with God and acceptance into His family as His sons and daughters. But we can ignore, or reject this gift and *perish*.

What does it mean when it says we will "perish"? It means to be lost, to be separated from God our Creator – who is the Source of joy and love and hope and peace and life! We can be separated from God both now, and *forever*.

But God didn't send His Son into the world to condemn us but to save us. John 3:17 says, "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."

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life (eternal life). *Being saved, and having eternal life, are the same thing.* In the Gospel of John, the words "eternal life" are used a number of times, and it never just means life that goes on and on and on. Think of it, if you're suffering or in a bad way, and someone says to you, "Don't worry, this will go on forever", that's not what you want to hear! "Eternal life" is a *quality of life*. It's life with God, a blessed life of joy and peace and wellbeing. Eternal life begins *now*, when we receive Christ into our life! Jesus prayed, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

See, every moment, every second of history, a drama is being played out. Will we perish, or will

we have everlasting life? All of us will live forever. The questions are, where, in what condition, and with whom? God gave His Son Jesus so that we may have eternal life – that we begin a new life in Christ here and now, that will ultimately lead us into the presence of our Savior.

So, what determines our fate? It's how we respond to God's love, and God's gift of salvation through Christ. Will we believe! "Believe" is kind of in vogue right now. Josh Groban sings a popular Christmas song of that title. Brooks and Dunn have a song "Believe". But notice, John 3:16 says "whoever believes *in him*" – not just a general kind of belief, but believing in the Son. Jesus. Here's where we have to be careful! Many people "believe" in Jesus in the sense that they believe there was a Jesus, that He came to earth. They may believe that the crucifixion, and even the resurrection, actually happened. But it's just kind of a cognitive belief – in our head. *And their lives are no different because they believe those facts.*

In the Bible, to "believe" involves more than just accepting certain facts about God or Jesus. It means to "trust in, rely upon, cling to" ...to cling to Christ, to rely totally on Him to save us, in a way that begins to change us from the inside out! John Paton and his wife were pioneer missionaries in the South Pacific, and they were trying to work with people who didn't even have a word for "believe" in their language. That was a huge problem when John began translating the Bible into the native language, because this word "believe" is found over 200 times in the New Testament. John was completely stuck until a villager came to visit one day. The man was exhausted from working in the hot sun, so he sat down in a chair. And in his native language, he said, "How wonderful it is when you are tired and can *lean your whole weight on something*. When John Paton heard that phrase, he said it was like lightning struck, and suddenly he realized, "That's it! -- 'Lean your whole weight on something.'" That was the thought John Paton was searching for, and that's what he used to translate "believe" into their native language.

To "believe" in Jesus is not just a casual, innocuous belief that there is a God and there was a Jesus. It is to put your whole weight down on Him, and trust Jesus completely to forgive your sins, and give you a new life with God that will last forever.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Max Lucado is a wonderful writer. He has some words to say about this amazing verse of Scripture, John 3:16. Max says John 3:16 is "a twenty-six word parade of hope: beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same. It's brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment, yet solid enough to weather two thousand years of storms and questions. If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder."

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