

Jesus, the Son of God

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[0 : 00] For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 3.16 has been described as the gospel in a nutshell, and rightly so because it succinctly summarizes the core claim of Christianity. And for that reason, it's perhaps the most frequently cited Bible verse ever.

And you see it referenced a lot in our culture. I remember when Tim Tebow was a Heisman Trophy winning quarterback with the Florida Gators.

In 2009, he had John 3.16 on his eye black. If you guys are from California or around the area, you guys know the In-N-Out Prince John 3.16 reference on their soda cups.

Or Forever 21, their bags has John 3.16 on there as well. So due to this widespread usage, even many people who have never opened the Bible for themselves have at least a passing familiarity with John 3.16.

[1 : 13] But this passing familiarity actually presents a danger because it can make us gloss over it, assume that we know it.

And this is not a small danger because as J. Max Stiles, who's a missionary and an author, writes in his book, *Marks of the Messenger*, losing the gospel doesn't happen all at once, but it happens in what is usually a four-step process.

First, the gospel is accepted. Second, the gospel is assumed. And then third, the gospel is confused. And then fourth, the gospel is lost.

We are in a historical and cultural moment in the U.S. where the gospel is certainly assumed and confused and in many places even lost.

And so it's, and because, and even for believers and for Christians, we can take this truth easily for granted. For God still loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

[2 : 10] Well, of course, God loves the world, we think, right? Well, of course, God gave his son. Of course, whoever believes in him will be saved. But these truths are not obvious, right? As I'm going to demonstrate to you.

And I'm going to use this morning John 3, 16 as the outline for this entire passage to talk about God's reason, his action, and his purpose. The reason, the action, and the purpose.

And the three things namely are the reason for his action is that God so loved the world. For God so loved the world. That's his reason. His action is that he gave his only son. And his purpose is this, that whoever believes should not perish but have eternal life.

Whoever believes in him. So that's going to be the outline that I'll follow. So first, let's talk about the reason. For God so loved the world. The way the sentence is structured, it intentionally highlights the intensity of God's love.

So if you were to translate that a little bit more literally to bring the force of that structure out, you might say something like, God loved the world in such a way that he indeed gave his only son.

[3 : 14] That's kind of what it says. God loved the world in such a way that he indeed gave his only son. But this love is often assumed and confused in our culture.

And we think that this is obvious and not remarkable. But of course, God loves the world. We say the world is so big and full of many people. How can he not love the world? In fact, even I love the world.

In fact, I think most people in the world love the world. Right? So what do you mean? Why is it remarkable that God loves the world? But the word love frequently rolls off our tongues, not because people think highly of love, but because people think lightly of love.

And we see this very, I mean, pervasively in popular bumper stickers that you see when cars are driving around. Right? For example, one bumper sticker says, Make love, not war.

And you guys have, I'm sure, seen that. Right? As if a simple commitment to love will erase all, you know, occasions for conflict in the world. Right? Or another one says, Believe in love.

[4 : 16] And the letters of that phrase, believe in love, are spelled with symbols of the world's various religions and philosophies. As if there's no significant or real theological differences.

And all those things should be set aside and simply uphold and to love one another. And when we hold these cultural assumptions, the statement, God so loved the world, doesn't amaze us.

Because we think the world is a wonderful place. We think that it's just grumps and warmongers and religious extremists that don't love the world. Other reasonable and high-minded folks all love the world.

So why is it remarkable at all that God loves the world? But if we think this way, then our estimation of the world is too high. And our understanding of God's love is naive and simplistic.

Just think about the headlines of newspapers this week. There are people who perpetrate heinous crimes in this world. There are narcissistic and seemingly psychopathic dictators and terrorists who oppress people.

[5 : 16] And to go up to these people who are suffering at the hands of these people, who face moral threats from these people and tell them, make love, not war. I mean, that's hippie nonsense, right?

Likewise, telling all sincere adherents of world religions that they just need to set aside their genuine theological differences and simply come together and try to love each other as if there's no substantial disagreements among them and about the most important things in life, as if their disagreements don't affect the way they ought to love.

That's arrogant and hypocritical. It's really the slogan, believe in love, understood in that sense is not much more than make believe. But the Bible's assessment of this world, on the other hand, is not naive and simplistic.

It's honest and realistic. Because God's love is not a vague sentimentality, but it's a raw and real love. And you see this throughout the context of John because the word love occurs very frequently in the Gospel of John.

He's known as the Apostle of Love. But apart from John 3.16, the world is never the object of God's love.

[6 : 24] It's never the object of love, period, in the Gospel of John. In numerous places, John talks about how God the Father loves God the Son. In numerous places, he talks about how Christians ought to love God.

In a lot of places, he talks about how Christians ought to love one another and about how God loves his people, his believers. But in stark contrast, the world and those who belong to it are described in the Gospel of John consistently as those devoid of love, those lacking love.

For example, chapter 5.42, Jesus accuses unbelieving Jews, saying, I know that you do not have the love of God within you. In 8.42, Jesus argues that they don't love him because they do not belong to the Father but to the devil.

And in our present passage, in verse 19, it says, The light has come into the world, and people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. The world, in John's understanding, is a dark and evil place.

The world is... That's why in the epistle of John, in 1 John, that is written by the same author, chapter 2.15-16, he tells believers, Do not love the world or the things in the world.

[7 : 39] If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. I mean, that's this. And so if you look at that context of all of John's writings, consistently the world is never the object.

If you know that, then you know this is remarkable. You know that this is atypical. The fact that God is telling us, teaching us that God loves the world. And of course, there's no contradiction here between God loving the world and then commanding us not to love the world because the love that God forbids is a fawning love that participates in sin opposed to God's love, which is a redeeming love that rescues people from sin.

So that's two different things. So there's no contradiction there. And we are to love the world in the same way God loves the world as well. But how can it be that the holy God loves the sinful world?

The focus of the statement is not how big and beautiful the world is, how deserving of God's love the world is, oh, God so loved the world. No, but the focus of the sentence is on God's love, how radical and unpredictable, surprising even it is, that God loves the world.

And if we honestly examine ourselves and our history, I think we would all admit this because 5,000 years of recorded human history have borne out the reality that we are sinful people, that we live in a broken world.

[9 : 01] As a theologian, Raynald Niebuhr was fond of saying, he said that men are sinful is one of the best attested and empirically verified facts of human existence. Yet God loves this world.

The very world that stands under his wrath. And that's the magnanimity of God. That's the graciousness of God. That's the immeasurable depth and extent of God's love that even this world is its object.

And this love is the reason for his saving action. He loved us first. His love is prior to his saving action. It's not as though we have to meet a certain set of criteria.

We have to clean ourselves up a little bit before God starts to love us. No, God loves us first. He loves the world. This sinful world. The world that tears itself apart and daily defies him.

He loves this world. As verse 17 elaborates, For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

[10 : 10] If you're a believer with us this morning, do we understand that Christ's mission was a rescue operation? Right? Our job is not to point the finger at the sinful world in judgment, in prideful judgment, but rather to point our finger toward Christ.

Say that that's where your redemption lies. That's where your rescue from sin lies. We expose the darkness of this world with the light of Christ, not to judge and to condemn, but to save in the way that Christ came to save.

And we have to remember that we all also have been saved out of this world. We all once belonged to this world. But God so loved the world.

This is a marvelous truth. It's not obvious. It's something that we can't gloss over. But then how can we be sure that God does in fact love the world?

We can be certain of God's love because God gave his only son in order to save the world. This is God's action. Right? This is what he did. He gave his only son.

[11 : 12] God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Right? The phrase only son stresses the greatness of the gift. And I've been, as some of you guys know, as part of launching a church plant, at the beginning of the life of the church plant, you don't have as many people giving towards it.

So you need to fundraise from external sources. And as I've been doing that, there's been few people who have been giving really faithfully even though they don't have much to give. And that's really meaningful because they haven't given sparingly out of their access, but they have given sacrificially out of their own need.

And that's more meaningful a gift. Right? Because they're giving in that way. And they're not giving what is expendable to them, but what is precious to them in order to support this ministry and mission.

So in a similar way, the word son, the only son, conveys that kind of preciousness of Christ. Someone that God cannot spare. Right? And only son also implies a unique irreplaceable relationship.

It's almost like a unique son. For example, in the Old Testament, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Isaac, Abraham's son Isaac, is referred to as an only son.

[12 : 25] Which, of course, literally is not true because Abraham had another son named Ishmael. But Ishmael was a son of his wife's servant, Hagar. And Sarah was so desperate for any kind of offspring, she gave her servant, Hagar, to Abraham and they had a son named Ishmael.

But Isaac was the son that God gave him in his old age through his own wife, Sarah. And so in Genesis 22-2, Isaac is called Abraham's only son.

And it says that Abraham loved him in a special way. He was the apple of his eye. The same language is used to describe God's only son, Jesus Christ. Right?

Of course, he's the father of all creation. In that sense, he's all of our father. Right? But Jesus is unique because he actually shares the nature of the father. Right?

As Colossians says, it's in chapter 1, he's the firstborn of all creation but not a part of creation for by Jesus, by him, all things were created. He's the image of the invisible God.

[13 : 26] The fullness of God dwells in Christ. In Philippians 2-6, that he is in the very form of God. Right? And the early Christians described this unique relationship between God the Father and God the Son by using the word begotten.

Right? And so some of you guys who have memorized John 3-16 in older translations may remember that, for example, KJV, the old NIV, as well as NASB, they all say, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

Right? And this idea of begotten highlights this unique relationship because to beget something is to become the father of something. Right? Which is different from creating something or making something.

Right? Because what you beget shares your own nature while what you make does not share your own nature. Right? So humans beget humans. Right? Dogs beget dogs. Right? But humans, right, we, but making things is different.

So civil engineers can make bridges. Right? Chefs make pumpkin pies. Right? Artists make very realistic looking statues of notable figures and they could even draw really realistic self-portraits of themselves but they're still not people.

[14 : 34] They're not humans. Right? It's because they're created. They're made. But Jesus is not made. He's a begotten son. He's, and that highlights his uniqueness and because he's begotten of the father, he's of the father.

He shares the same nature as the father and he's God. He's a son of God unlike us who are created. We're creatures. We're made by him. We are not God. Right? So then in all of history, indeed all eternity, there has ever only been one begotten son and that's Jesus Christ.

He's God's only son, a unique son, a beloved son, a precious son, a perfect son, an irreplaceable son and God gave him for us.

Mere creatures, mean, despicable, profane, selfish, arrogant, greedy creatures at that. Do you feel that disparity?

There never was there in history a more unequal exchange. I think about this sometimes and my daughter is only two years old and the day is far out but sometimes I think about the day when she will get married and giving her away to another man, however exceptional he is and he would have to be quite exceptional, and that's going to be very difficult.

[16 : 02] I think that might be one of the most difficult things I do for her, right? I mean, because this little daddy's girl will from that point on will belong to him and be his helper and her well-being will depend largely on that relationship, right?

That's painful, that's difficult but then can you imagine then this, if that's after, you know, it's only been two years but imagine that'd be difficult after 20 years but if that's difficult, can you imagine the difficulty of the heavenly father who has had an eternal, unbroken fellowship with his son, a perfect union and communion and you might as well tear his heart out, right, to have him do that and not to enjoy a good, you know, marriageable partner either, right?

He comes to die, right? He comes to die a sinner's death to bear the judgment wrath of the father, to be separated and alienated from him so that he can redeem a sinful, broken people as a bride for himself.

Yet God the father knowing this fully sends his only son into the world. He gave his only son.

As Romans 8.32 says, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

[17 : 22] Do you ever doubt the father's love for you? Do you ever, because of your struggles and sufferings in your life, do they cast doubt on God's good will toward you?

If that's the case, look at the price he paid for you. Look at the gift he sent to you and look at the lengths he went to save you. Look at the only son he gave for you.

And what was the purpose? So that was the reason and that was God's action. He gave his only son. What was the purpose for which God gave his only son? That's in the last part of John 3.16 that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God's purpose is to save those who are perishing and bring them to eternal life. The world is a perishing place and either we will be saved by God or we will perish without him. There's no third option.

Life is found in God and therefore in order to have life we must come to him and when we depart from him when we're separated from him the inevitable consequence is that we perish without him. [18 : 33] If you want the warmth and the light of the fire you must draw near to it and when you leave it you experience cold and darkness. God is the consuming fire and the light of glory and to be with him is to have eternal life and to be separated from him is to perish.

So if you do not yet have a relationship with Jesus Christ if you do not if you have not yet entrusted your life to Jesus then I want to ask you do you know that you are perishing? The world is perishing and there is no exception because it is under God's judgment.

Yet there is hope right for you in verse 16 it says for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. You see this is a radical concept because the Jews in Jesus' day at the time this was written right they were familiar with the idea that God loved Israel.

They believed that and heartily agreed with that statement God loves Israel but there is no extant writing in all of Jewish literature from this time none of it there is nowhere does it say that God loves the world right this was a crazy idea that God loves the world this sinful world and then promised to save whoever believes that is a distinctively Christian idea that God loves and embraces all people right and this is you can really see this borne out throughout history during my studies at Gordon Commonwealth Theological Seminary I worked at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity which is a leading research institution on the world religions and it chronicles the shifts in the gravitational center of Christianity over the history of the church and what it shows is that around 30 AD predictably the center of gravity of Christianity was in Jerusalem right that's where it began but then by you know 1000 AD it had shifted north to Constantinople which is now

[20 : 38] Istanbul right and then by 1500 AD it had shifted further north and west to what is now Budapest, Hungary and Vienna, Austria and then by 1900 it had shifted further west largely due to the rise of the US and the gravitational center of Christianity at that point was Spain Madrid, Spain and then since then it has been shifting further south and further east and now it's in Niger, Africa and it's expected to continue to shift southeast over the next 50 years into Nigeria right so isn't that pretty I mean that's pretty amazing it's gone from right Middle East to Eastern Europe to Western Europe to close to the US area Europe and then now to South America and to South Africa it's been all over the different continents and just 100 years ago the countries with the largest population of Christians were US Russia Germany France and Britain in that order but today it is US

Brazil Russia China and Mexico the five largest populations of Christians in other words Christianity has flourished everywhere and in stark contrast if you look at all the other major world religions the center of gravity has never shifted you look at Islam the center of gravity is now in the Middle East and has always been in the Middle East if you look at Hinduism the center of gravity is now in Asia it has always been in Asia if you look at Buddhism the center of gravity it's now in Asia and it has always been Asia the ability to affect and embrace all peoples and cultures distinguishes Christianity from all the other religions in the world all the other major religions in the world and that's because the essential characteristics of these other world religions are encrusted they're kind of confined to their original geographic and cultural location so for example if you look at Islam they said the Quran can never be translated because God spoke originally in Arabic so if it's translated then it's no longer no longer sacred it's no longer has that has the power right unlike our faith in Christianity where actually the scriptures are written originally written in a language other than the language of our founder right and it's been translated to hundreds and hundreds of languages to great effect right the history of Christianity has been a series of advances and retreats in so many different cultures and contexts that you can rightly say that there's no such thing as a particular Christian culture or a particular Christian civilization because we've already had multiple Christian cultures and multiple Christian civilizations and what is the reason for that is that from the beginning Christians beckoned the whole world to come and believe because our God is a God for all people and because the gospel of Jesus Christ is a good news for all people and because we have said whoever would believe whoever believes may now come and have eternal life and that's the reason why you and I can be here this morning to worship black and white richer and poorer more highly educated less educated all of us God saved because he promised whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life but if that's true and whoever believes is saved the converse also must be true that whoever does not believe is not saved right and verse 18 makes this explicit read

with me whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe faith is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God faith is a necessary condition for inheriting eternal life

Jesus is the light that has come into the dark world and we need to respond by walking into that light right in a campground right without electricity fire is a source of life right on the fire you boil the water to make sure that it's clean to drink right at night when you can't see you gather by the fire so you can see when it starts to get cold you gather by the fire for the warmth and you cook the food in the fire right that's your source of life the fire has come the light has come into the world yet you must approach it what good is it if you stay out in the dark dark you know forest and therefore the fire doesn't do you any good and C.S. Lewis writes about this in his book *The Great Divorce* he says there are only two kinds of people in the end those who say to God your will be done and those to whom God says in the end your will be done all that are in hell choose it without that self choice there could be no hell now without denying the sovereignty and providence of God in salvation the Bible unequivocally affirms human responsibility whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed the name of the only son of God unbelief is a human responsibility

I once heard a story about some group of college students art students who went to the Louvre in Paris to look at some art they had a professor leading them and they were examining a famous masterpiece I don't know which one it was exactly maybe it was a Rembrandt or a Da Vinci they're looking at it and one particularly immature and arrogant student started ranting and criticizing the drawing and the professor that was leading the group grew impatient and rebuked the student she said this is an undisputed masterpiece by one of the greatest masters in history the artistic superiority of this painting was established 400 years ago and is no longer open to judgment it is not the painting but your taste that is open to judgment and has now been found lacking similarly the supreme worth of the son of God was established in eternity past and God the father and the spirit of God bear witness about him the worth of the son of God is not open to debate it's not open to our judgment as a result whoever does not believe in him is condemned already that's their judgment because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God when we reject

[27 : 28] Christ it's not he but we who are condemned verses 19 to 20 explain this further read along with me it says and this is the judgment the light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil for everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works should be exposed the people are judged because even though Christ has come into the world the light has come into the world they have loved darkness and hated the light they refuse to come to the light and why did they refuse to come to the light because the light that enables us to see also makes us seen the light that enables our sight is also the same light that exposes our sin and I had a very clear experience of this when I was leading an investigative bible study for unbelievers in college one year and I had one friend who was particularly contentious but we had a good relationship and after each session we'd debate and talk for hours and debate and I'd plead with him and I'd argue with him and then one time he stopped me in my tracks and said

Sean I understand what you're saying and I understand all the arguments but the crux of the matter is this is that I like girls and I like sleeping around with them and if I became a Christian I'd have to stop doing that I don't want to become a Christian I mean I was shocked but he was brutally honest and that was a strikingly biblical statement because that's exactly what he says people are afraid of the light they don't want to come to the light lest their sin be exposed and that's of course kind of blatantly immoral example kind of an extreme example but at the heart of every rejection of Christ is that same stubborn refusal to conform to God's ways and to insist on our own way people hate the light the world hates the light so they will not come to it but it says in verse 21 whoever does what is true comes to the light so they may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God now this is a very interesting sentence because it literally says whoever does the truth right the truth in the biblical perspective is not something that you just believe in it's not just the mental cognitive thing but it's something you do right and to do the truth is to live in keeping with the truth and who is the truth in the gospel of

John it says in chapter 14 6 Jesus says I am the way I am the truth and the life no one comes to the father except through me in order to do the truth you must come to the light of Christ so the cross of Christ where Christ died for our sins that's God's ultimatum to the world it's simultaneously God's

greatest his gravest indictment of the world because it displays the fullness of God's wrath laid on Jesus the innocent son of God the righteous son of God at the same time it's God's greatest invitation because the fullness of God's love is displayed on the cross because God so loves the world that he gives his only son for us so we might not perish but have eternal life like a lighthouse that shines into the dark void of the treacherous sea the cross stands to show for God's persevering love in this cold desolate sinful world and you know what's amazing when you do the truth it says when you come to

Christ verse 21 tells us that your works have been carried out in God you thought that you had come to believe on your own accord but when you come to believe you discover that God had carried you here you thought you were searching for God but then when you finally find him you discover that it was he who was pursuing you searching for you why any of us as a Christian is due not ultimately to our own personal soul searching but the sovereign God himself that he's the reason his pursuit is the reason why we are Christians at all one of my favorite poems is by an English poet named Francis Thompson called The Hound of Heaven and if you guys have read that anyone and there he talks about how God was the hound of heaven with the tremendous love pursuing him and he writes this

I fled him down the nights and down the days I fled him down the arches of the years I fled him down the labyrinth in ways of my own mind and in the midst of tears I hid from him in under running laughter but God pursues him relentlessly and after tracking him down he tells him that he is the only one who can truly love him God tells him he he says this and human love needs human meriting how hast thou merited of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot alack thou knowest not how little worthy of any love thou art whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee save me save only me and at the end of the poem the protagonist finally gives in to this hound of heaven and he exclaims our fondest fondest means in old English means foolish our fondest blindest weakest

[33 : 22] I am he whom thou seekest that's all of us God pursued us who's the most foolish most blind most weak God so love the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life let's pray together heavenly father your persevering sacrificial initiating love is truly too good to be true when someone asks why did

God love you why did God choose you Lord we cannot give an answer the answer is beyond our comprehension yet we know without a doubt that you do love us because you displayed your love for us in sending your own son your only son to die on the cross and Lord we thank you for that we give you praise for that we pray that you would help us as your people to appreciate to appropriate that truth anew so we may continue to do the truth to live in keeping with the truth with Jesus and his work and we pray that you would continue to use us as your people so that more people may come to know you to believe in you so that they too may be saved from this perishing world in Jesus name we pray amen