

The Greatest Verse in the Bible

John 3:16

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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*

Because so many Americans watch sports events, Christians often attempt to present some kind of gospel witness in stadiums and arenas. Perhaps you have seen the signs, held up in the crowd or posted on a wall. Most commonly, the signs have this short message: JN. 3:16. The idea is obviously that people either know or will find out that JN is shorthand for the Gospel of John, and that 3:16 means chapter 3, verse 16. The hope is that great things will happen if people will merely pick up a Bible and read this one verse, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Some people argue that Genesis 1:1 is the most important verse in the Bible: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Others say the Ten Commandments are most important. But, significant as it is to learn that our world has a Creator and to know what is right and wrong, these can be known without the Bible. Nature itself reveals its Maker and all mankind has an inward conviction about morality. But John 3:16 presents a message that cannot be known apart from the Bible. How does God feel about us and what has he done, if anything, to help us? There is no greater question and no more glorious answer than that given in John 3:16. Bruce Milne says it “is a masterly and moving summary of the gospel, cast in terms of the love of God.”¹ Martin Luther called this verse “the Bible in

¹ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King!* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 77.

miniature,” because it contains the heart of the God’s entire message. This is why John 3:16 is the greatest verse in the Bible.

GOD’S AMAZING LOVE

Another way to see the greatness of John 3:16 is to point out that it presents the Bible’s greatest theme: God’s love for us through Jesus Christ. Naturally, John is not the only biblical writer to extol God’s love, and we can profit from looking at how others describe it.

Paul says God’s love is *great*: “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4-5). We tend to overuse the word *great*. We say we had a “great time” if we enjoyed ourselves at all. If God blesses us a bit in ministry, we say we had a “great success.” Overused like this, the word “great” loses some of its force. But when the Bible says God’s love is great, it means it! We see that God’s love for the world is great in the amazing care he exercised in creating it; nature reveals the marks of the most loving craftsmanship. The Greek word Paul uses for great (*pollein*) is used to describe an overflowing harvest or intense emotions. God’s love truly deserves to be called “great”.

Paul elsewhere describes God’s love as *unfathomable*. In the third chapter of Ephesians, he prays that believers “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18-19). What we are to comprehend about the dimensions of God’s love is that they are beyond measure. It is possible to exhaust the love of a spouse or of friends – and in extreme cases even of siblings or parents. But it is not possible to exhaust the love of God. Frederick M. Lehman wrote:

The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell
It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell.

God’s love is joined to all his other attributes. A great mistake that many make is to pit one of God’s attributes against another. Many of us, for instance, prefer God’s love to God’s holiness. But we must never think that we must or can choose between the two. God’s holiness is a loving holiness, and God’s love is a *holy* love. Our

generation has spoiled much of the idea of love – particularly romantic love – by joining it with sin. But God does not and cannot do that. His love is joined to holy purposes, and his love for us will have the ultimate result of bringing us to a gloriously holy condition. When I am counseling couples prior to their wedding, I often hear one of them (usually the bride) say, “I never want to change him!” I always pause, lean forward, look her in the eye, and say, “You will! You will!” God’s love never says, “I don’t want to change you.” Because God’s love is holy, he intends to change us by loving means, so that we will become the holy people we were always meant to be.

God is *almighty*, and therefore his is an almighty love. This means he is able to do all that his love desires for us. J. I. Packer writes that God’s love “has at its heart an almighty purpose to bless which cannot be thwarted.”² Who, then, shall separate us from this love? Paul asks. “I am sure,” he answers, “that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:35-38).

Moreover, as God is unchangeable, so also his love is *unchangeable*. John Owen writes, “Though we change every day, yet his love does not change. If anything in us or on our part could stop God loving us, then he would long ago have turned away from us. It is because his love is fixed and unchangeable that the Father shows us infinite patience and forbearance. If his love was not unchangeable, we would perish.”³

God is *eternal*, and so is his love. Paul says, “He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). God’s love for us originated in eternity past, and its end flows to eternity future. God says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3). “For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you” (Isa. 54:10). Moreover, as God is *sovereign*, so is his love. Ephesians 1:5 says, “In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1974), 250.

³ John Owen: *Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 29-30.

will, to the praise of his glorious grace.” James Boice writes, “God’s love is a sovereign one... his love is uninfluenced by anything in the creature. And if that is so, it is the same as saying that the cause of God’s love lies only in himself... In Scripture no cause for God’s love other than his electing will is ever given.”⁴ This was God’s explanation to Israel for the love he showed them in the exodus: “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you” (Dt. 7:7-8).

Lastly, we should note that God’s love is *infinite*. There is no greater proof of this than John’s statement that God loved *the world*. There is an infinite distance between God and this wicked world, but God’s love is infinitely great to span that distance. God tells us, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). But he still loves us! Our world has rebelled against God, flouting his authority and mocking his ways. Most people reject God’s rule over their lives. Paul says, “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). That is an accurate description of our world today. The distance between us and God is infinite in every way, yet God has loved the world.

When John speaks of the “world,” he is being intentionally provocative. Old Testament Jews believed that God loved them, but rejected the idea that God loved anyone else. Leon Morris explains, “It is a distinctively Christian idea that God’s love is wide enough to embrace all people. His love is not confined to any national group or spiritual elite.”⁵ The same is true today. John does not say that God loves religious people or that God loves Christians, but that “God so loved the world” (Jn. 3:16). This is why the message of Jesus Christ is good news for everyone. Romans 5:8 tells us, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

⁴ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 337.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 203.

GOD'S GIVING LOVE

This brings us to the particular point that John 3:16 stresses: God's love is a *giving* love. The Greek language has four words for love. The first is *storge*, which is family love. Whatever they think of each other, family members are to be loyal. The second is *eros*, which is romantic or sexual love. The third kind of love is *philos*, which is the love of friendship or attraction. The word *philosophy* means a love of wisdom. This is a receiving love; it is based on what we get and how good something or someone makes us feel. But the New Testament stresses a fourth kind of love, using the Greek word *agape*. This is a giving love. It is not based on what we receive but on what we give. Agape love has its classic definition in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

The greatness of God's love for the world is most clearly seen in the gift that he gave: "his only Son." John says not merely that God loved the world, but that "God *so* loved the world." The word "so" indicates both the manner in which God loved the world – by giving his Son – and the intensity of God's love for the world. How do we measure God's love for us? By calculating the infinite value of his precious Son, Jesus Christ.

John refers to Jesus as God's "only Son". We are undoubtedly intended to reflect upon this in light of our love for our own children. Even though we are corrupted by sin, it is natural for us to love our children with great intensity. Mothers exhaust themselves rocking babies to sleep. Fathers spend long hours fixing bikes and playing games they would have no interest in were it not for their children. Parents weary themselves with extra jobs to clothe and feed and educate their children. To neglect our children, as many do today, is so obviously wrong that it is universally condemned. Nature knows no greater love than that of a parent for his or her child, and Christ is God the Father's *only* child. God many times spoke of his love for his Son, and Jesus often basked in the love of his Father. So, in giving his only Son God was truly giving his very heart. John Flavel asks, "Who would part with a son for the sake of his dearest friends? But God gave him to, and delivered him for enemies: O love

unspeakable!”⁶ God could not possibly love this world more or better than in giving his beloved only Son.

In saying that God gave his only Son, John 3:16 corrects a terrible but common mistake in thinking about God the Father. Because Jesus died to satisfy God’s justice, some think that God’s love is caused by Christ’s sacrifice and is even reluctant or half-hearted. But John 3:16 teaches exactly the opposite “The gift of Christ... is the result of God’s love to the world, and not the cause. To say that God loves us because Christ died for us, is wretched theology indeed. But to say that Christ came into the world in consequence of the love of God, is scriptural truth.”⁷ God loved this evil world not after but before the Savior came to turn our hearts back to heaven; God’s love is the reason we can be forgiven and born again to inherit eternal life.

When John says that God “gave” his only Son, exactly what does that mean? According to the Bible, the Father sent the eternal and glorious Son into this world, to take our mortal nature with all the weakness and suffering that involved (see Heb. 2:17). Jesus states thirty-nine times in John’s Gospel that the Father “sent” him into the world with a mission of salvation to perform. God sent him to reveal his truth, to proclaim the good news of salvation, and especially to do the work needed for the salvation of those who believe. J. C. Ryle says:

Christ is God the Father’s gift to a lost and sinful world. He was given generally to be the Saviour, the Redeemer, the Friend of sinners, -- to make an atonement sufficient for all, -- and to provide a redemption large enough for all. To effect this, the Father freely gave Him up to be despised, rejected, mocked, crucified, and counted guilty and accursed for our sakes.⁸

This means that when we read that God “gave his only Son,” we should think of the cross where Jesus suffered and died that we might be forgiven of our sins. So great is his love that if our redemption from sin required the tortuous death of his only Son – even the outpouring of his own wrath upon his most beloved child – God was willing to give him for this. Jeremiah Burroughs marvels:

Behold the infinite love of God to mankind and the love of Jesus Christ that, rather than God see the children of men to perish eternally, He would send

⁶ John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1820; reprint, 1968), I:68.

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), I:I60.

⁸ *Ibid.*

His Son to take our nature upon Him and thus suffer such dreadful things. Herein God shows His love... It pleased the Father to break His Son and to pour out His blood. Here is the love of God and of Jesus Christ. Oh, what a powerful, mighty, drawing, efficacious meditation this should be to us!"⁹

During the darkest times of World War I, a war that took the lives of a shocking number of English sons, a man took his little boy out for a walk at night. The boy noticed that some of the houses had stars in the windows. "That comes from this terrible war, laddie," the father explained. "It shows that these people have given a son." They had walked a bit further when the young boy stopped, and pointed up to the sky where a bright evening star had appeared. He said, "Daddy, God must have given a Son, too." Leon Morris remarks, "That is it. In the terrible war against evil, God gave his Son. That is the way evil was defeated. God paid the price."¹⁰

God's gift therefore was not only infinite in value, but it was also perfectly suited to our greatest need. John 3:16 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." We might prefer that God would do something other than send his only Son to be our Savior. But God's love addresses our true and greatest need. Whenever the New Testament speaks of God's love, it almost invariably does so in terms of the atoning work of Christ upon the cross. John 3:16 is a typical example. In the previous two verses Jesus told Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15). That was an allusion to his death on the cross. This, then, is how the world knows God's love and receives God's love: not because we are able to love one another a bit; not because there is beauty in the world; but because God sent Jesus to die for our sins. John writes in his first epistle, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world... He loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:9-10).

⁹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1648, reprint 1990), 353.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 100.

RECEIVING GOD'S LOVE

The Puritan John Flavel concluded his study of John 3:16 with three keen observations. First, he says, this verse shows us “The exceeding preciousness of souls, and at what a high rate God values them, that he will give his Son, his only Son out of his bosom, as a ransom for them.”¹¹ Surely this argues – God having given his only Son for the saving of souls – that we ought to labor with all our might to bring people to salvation. John 3:16 says that “whoever believes shall not perish but have eternal life.” It is through our witness that they can believe. It is because we took an interest in their souls, because we spoke earnestly to them about Jesus, and because we invited them to join us at church and hear God’s Word that souls are saved today. This must apply most urgently to our own children. It is dismaying to see how little interest so many parents take in the souls of their children. Since we love them, and since their souls are so precious to God, we should be especially determined to set them a godly example, to pray with and for them, to teach them God’s Word, and to involve them in the worship and life of the church.

Second, Flavel notes, since God has given us his Son, we may be confident of receiving every other help and mercy we need to endure this life and arrive safely into heaven. Knowing this should give us peace in every storm and confidence in the face of life’s trials. Knowing how much God has already given us – his very best in the person of his own Son – we should trust his love and come to him with a holy boldness in prayer. Paul reasoned, “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?” (Rom. 8:32). God will not withhold anything we need, having already given his Son Jesus, so we should not shrink back from asking for and confidently awaiting anything we truly need.

Third, Flavel says, “If the greatest love hath been manifested in giving Christ to the world, then it follows that the greatest evil and wicked-ness is manifested in despising, slighting, and rejecting

¹¹ Flavel, I:68.

Christ.”¹² There can be no greater condemnation of our hearts than for us to disregard this amazing love of God in giving his only Son to suffer in our place. What does God ask and expect of us? God demands what love always desires: to be received. Jesus said in John 6:29, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” John 3:16 says that God calls us to believe on Jesus Christ – to receive his love-gift through personal faith in Jesus. If we believe, he promises us “eternal life.” But if we are so hardened of heart to refuse this matchless gift from God, John says the result is that we will “perish.” Having spurned God’s love on the cross, we must receive the just penalty for all our sins and especially for the chief sin of rejecting God’s only Son. As the writer of Hebrews warns us, “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Heb. 2:3).

There is one last application for those who believe in Christ and who thus are born again into eternal life. If God loved us by giving us his Son, we ought to love him with all that we have in return.

Shortly after the end of the American Civil War, a man in farm clothes was seen kneeling at a gravestone in the soldier’s cemetery in Nashville. An observer came up and asked, “Is that the grave of your son?” The farmer replied, “No, I have seven children, all of them young, and a wife on my poor farm in Illinois. I was drafted and, despite the great hardship it would cause, I was required to join the Army. But on the morning I was to depart this man, my neighbor’s older son, came over and offered to take my place in the war.” The observer solemnly asked, “What is that you are writing on his grave?” The farmer replied, “I am writing, ‘He died for me.’”

With that same devotion, we should love God for his love in giving Jesus Christ to die for us. And we should express that devotion by loving others with the same kind of love God has shown to us. We are to show a love the world does not know – a love not based on getting, not one that seeks mainly for ourselves, but a love that says “God has given to me, so I want to love him by giving to others.” This giving love should beautify our marriages, should enliven our friendships, and should glorify God in the church. This was John’s

¹² Flavel, 1:70.

own application in his first epistle, having spoken first of God's love for us in the giving of his Son: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 Jn. 4:11). If we live out God's amazing, giving love, that will be our strongest testimony to a loveless world, so that others will learn of God's amazing love from us, and that by believing in him they, too, will have eternal life.