

*The Gift of God's Love: John 3:16*  
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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This morning we're going to talk about love. That can be a very vague term in many contexts. But in the context of the Bible it is very concrete. Specifically, this morning we're to talk about God's love. This is a love that was demonstrated very powerfully in the Father giving His Son for us.

This love is so vast and multi-faceted and in some ways mysterious to us, that we could spend years contemplating this one attribute of our God. D. A. Carson, a well-respected evangelical scholar, has a book entitled *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*. You might not think of God's love as a difficult doctrine. But when you start looking carefully into the ways the Bible speaks of God's love, you'll realize that it actually is somewhat difficult. In what sense does He love the whole world? And how does that relate to His special love for those whom He saves? It is complex and fascinating and beyond our ability to fully comprehend. We'll wrestle with this a bit today as we compare our passage with some other texts. There are complexities to the love of God that we will never fully understand in this life.

And yet this love we're talking about is also wonderfully simple and straight-forward and personal, such that the youngest believer can rejoice in the words, "Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so."

This morning I want us to meditate on this great love. I want to probe some of the depths of this great reality, and I also hope that we will all experience this love very personally in our lives.

We have one verse that we're going to focus on today. It's one of the most well-known verses in all the Bible. The great John 3:16. Often quoted as a summary of the Gospel. Indeed, it is a great summary of the Good News that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. That is very, very Good News! Perishing in hell would be a very sad and miserable end. But to spend eternity in heaven with Jesus, that will be wonderful. The problem is that our sin keeps us separated from God. But that's why God's love means so much to us. God's love expressed in the giving of His Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place, to take the penalty for our sin, to bridge that chasm which our sin has created.

I want to take this verse phrase by phrase.

### **For God So Loved . . .**

The word “for” connects this with the previous verse, which ended with a reference to “eternal life.” There was that odd but vivid Old Testament illustration of Moses lifting up the bronze snake in the wilderness. That story is in Numbers 21. The people who were bit by the deadly snakes were to look up at the bronze snake on a pole, which the Lord had instructed Moses to make, and when they looked up at it they would be saved. They would live and not die.

Jesus, too, was lifted up. He was lifted up to die on a cross. He is also lifted up at the right hand of the Father. And those who look to Him in faith will be saved. We will live and not die. We will have eternal life and not perish. Verse 16 expands on and explains further the statement in verse 15 that whoever believes in [Jesus] will have eternal life.

In fact, those same words—“whoever believes”—show up in both verses (15 and 16). But you can see that verse 16 gives more details.

Now, an interesting thing to think about here is whether verse 16 is still the words of Jesus, or if we now have John’s inspired comments following Jesus’ words. The Greek doesn’t have quotation marks to tell us exactly where the quote from Jesus ends. The context is pretty clear earlier in this conversation. We know when John is quoting Nicodemus, and then quoting Jesus.

But when we move from verse 15 to verse 16, it’s a bit unclear whether this should still be red letters or not. If you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, your translation may have red letters all the way to verse 21. Or the red letters might end at verse 15.

I’ll leave that to you all to debate over lunch. It doesn’t make much of a difference at the end of the day, since we believe the whole Bible (not just the red lettering) is inspired by God and entirely true and authoritative for us. Whether it’s Jesus, Himself, explaining to Nicodemus, or if it’s John the Gospel-writer explaining this to all of us, the important thing for us is that this is true. This good news is true.

And when we go from verse 15 to verse 16 we’re going from this comment about believing unto eternal life (in verse 15) back to the source of where this Good News originates. It originates in the love of God. God’s amazing love. God IS love, John tells us elsewhere (1 John 4:8, 16). And we have breathtaking displays of the love of God throughout Scripture.

Last week the children and youth studied the life of the prophet Hosea, who was instructed by God to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him. Which is a heart-wrenching illustration to us of God’s love for His people who are unfaithful to Him. The little craft activity sheet that our 3 year old brought

home last week had this simple, but profound, sentence on it. “God loves people who don’t love Him back.”

This week I was moved to tears thinking about that statement. I am overwhelmed thinking of how weak my love is for God. Yet in spite of that, God’s love for me is so powerful.

We saw it again in today’s SS lesson on Jonah. God’s pursuing love. He goes to great lengths to pursue people, even when they don’t want to be found. This is God’s love.

I love Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3 where he speaks of the love of Christ. Of course, the love of the Father and the love of the Son are intertwined. The Father made the sacrifice of giving His Son. The Son made the sacrifice of His own life. We see an immensity of love showering down upon us, undeserved and unending.

Paul prays that we would “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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

The love of Christ is beyond anything that we can comprehend. It is so vast, so amazing, so powerful, so sacrificial, so glorious! Christ’s love is demonstrated in his sacrificial death. He gave himself for us. And we may think we know that. We may even take that for granted, thinking it’s something we’ve heard over and over again since childhood. By God’s grace, we may know something of the love of Christ, but we don’t even come close to understanding His love comprehensively. In fact, we will spend eternity in heaven growing in our knowledge and understanding of Christ’s love and the Father’s love for us. It’s infinite love. Both the Father and the Son are infinite Beings. And our finite minds will never fully grasp the dimensions of this love.

Do you ever feel unloved? Do you ever despair thinking that no one cares about your life? Look to our gracious and loving God. Turn to Christ. And you will find a love that is without end. You will find love that surpasses knowledge, love that is beyond measure, love that will bring you security and joy that will last for an eternity.

I like the way the Jesus Storybook Bible puts it, which we read often in our family devotions. It speaks of God’s Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.

For God so loved . . .

### **The World . . .**

This is a significant term for John. The word is used 185 times in NT, 78 in Gospel of John, 24 more in John’s letters, 3 in

Revelation. So it shows up in John's writing more than anywhere else. And there are various ways that it is used.

I think there are two important connotations in this context. First, the "world" implies sinful, fallen humanity. Think of 1 John 2:15-17 which uses "world" 6 times in just these 3 verses.

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever." (1 John 2:15–17, NIV)

The world is bad. And, yes, we are born into this world and are part of this world as long as we remain apart from Christ. And this highlights how intense God's love is, how loving He is, that He would love the unlovable. It's not that we're good, and He loves our goodness. It's that we're so bad, and He loves us in spite of our badness. God's love comes to us and rescues us out of the grips of the world's ways. Jesus says to His disciples in John 15:19, "I chose you out of the world."

Now, an interesting question comes up here, too. We might wonder, how can God tell us NOT to love the world, when we see in John 3:16 that He DOES love the world? What's going on here? Is this a double standard? Don Carson explains, "Christians are not to love the world with the selfish love of participation; God loves the world with the self-less, costly love of redemption." (page 205)

Yes, we are so prone to lust after the things of the world and worship idols. God's love for the world is anything but that. His love is a redeeming love, a love that lifts us out of that gutter and elevates us to a much higher realm of enjoyments. He draws us into the joy of His love.

We may be confused, too, over how God's wrath against sin relates to His love for sinners. For example, in Ephesians 2 we're told the bad news that we were by nature children of wrath. But in the next breath we're told the Good News that "God, being rich in mercy, because of the love with which he loved us, . . . raised us up with [Christ] . . ."

How do we reconcile this? Is God angry with us? Or does He love us? And how is it that He moved toward us in love even when we were still children of wrath? Well, this is partly the complexity of who God is. It's also partly the complexity of personal relationships. There are usually multiple layers to any relationship.

I'm grasping for an analogy, and this one might not work. No analogy is perfect. But we might think of a judge who has an intense sense of justice and is committed to making sure that

criminals serve their sentence. He hates crime and hates those who commit crimes. But, being a virtuous man, and because of his hatred of crime and injustice, he desires to see criminals transformed into law-abiding citizens who love what is good and care for others. He wants to see criminals become virtuous individuals. And so he reaches out in love to lift them from the misery of their chains, the misery of their crimes, doing good for them even at great cost to himself, caring for them, instructing them, that they would be transformed into new individuals.

God is just, and it is right for Him to hate sin. Thus we were under His wrath. And if it wasn't for his vast love, all of us would remain under His wrath. But He had mercy on us. He loved us. And therefore there's a way for us to be lifted from the misery of our chains, from the misery of our sin, there's an escape from His wrath. This is God's love for the sinful world.

A second important connotation of "world" here is that God's love extends beyond the Jewish people. Nicodemus would have had no trouble with the idea of God's love for Israel, God's love for the Jewish people, God's love for Nicodemus and his people. But God's love for the world? God's love for those outside of Israel? That would have been a very new concept for Nicodemus. It could have been a tough pill to swallow.

The Apostle Paul makes this point in that key verse at the beginning of Romans. "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*" (Romans 1:16, ESV)

There is something very special about the Jewish people in that God chose them as a special people for Himself. And the ways that God delivered the Israelites and instructed them, and the prophecies and promises He gave to them—it all pointed forward to the Messiah. The gospel is all through the Old Testament. And it's fulfilled in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who came to this earth as a Jew, ministering primarily to the Jewish community. There is a priority here to the Jews, as God's special chosen people. But Paul then quickly adds that the gospel is also to the Greek. It's for Gentiles as well. It's for non-Jews as well as Jews.

This shows the power of the gospel in that it breaks down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14). As Paul writes in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." The gospel will go out to all the people groups of the earth, and those who are saved all become part of the one body of Christ.

This message is not only for the Jews. This salvation is not only for the Jews. It is for all the nations, all the people groups, all

the ethnicities of the world. John emphasizes this in 1 John as well. *“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”* (1 John 2:1–2, ESV)

So the message that was shared with Nicodemus is now the message shared with us, and is a message to be shared with the whole world. It’s not just for one group of people or one nation. It’s not just for the folks in this church. This isn’t a message you take home and hide under a basket. This is a message to be shouted from the mountain tops. It’s for everybody to hear!

You must be born again! Repent and believe the Gospel. For everyone who believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. This is the commission we receive from our Lord Jesus Christ, to go and make disciples . . . of whom? . . . *of all nations* . . . of all the people groups in the world (Matthew 28:18).

For God so loved the world . . .

### **That He Gave His Only Son . . .**

The Old Testament contains a very powerful foreshadowing of this in the life of Abraham of Isaac. In Genesis 22 God tested Abraham, telling him, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, . . . and offer him as a burnt offering . . .” We know from a passage in Hebrews passage that Abraham believed God’s promises, and therefore believed that God could raise his only beloved son from the dead. And so Abraham obeyed. But at the last moment the angel of the Lord called out to Abraham, “Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And then there was a ram caught in a thicket which Abraham sacrificed instead of his son. What an emotional and intense moment that was!

In that event we have a glimpse into the Godhead. The love between Abraham and Isaac points to the deep love between God the Father and God the Son. And Abraham’s willingness to offer up his only beloved son points to God the Father who gave His only Son.

As we read the story of Abraham and Isaac we should learn something of our great God. He did not spare His only Son. In this case, no one called out at the last moment and called it off. The Father drove that knife into His Son’s heart. God did not spare His own Son, His only Son, His beloved Son. But He gave him up for US! He crushed His beloved Son on that cross. He poured out His wrath against sin upon His very own Son, so that

He can spare us from that wrath. Jesus was not spared so that we can be spared.

Leon Morris writes, “His love is not a vague, sentimental feeling, but a love that costs. God gave what was most dear to him.” (page 203)

John Stott says it well, “The more the gift costs the giver, and the less the recipient deserves it, the greater the love is seen to be.”<sup>1</sup>

This is God’s great love shown to us in the giving of His only Son.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .

### **That Whoever Believes in Him . . .**

What does it mean to believe? To believe is to look away from ourselves and look to the power of God to save us. We have to stop trusting in our own abilities (which is very limited), our own strength (which is not great), our own intuition (which is misguided), or our own goodness (which is nonexistent). Don’t look to yourself for salvation. Don’t look to yourself to get you out of the mess that your life is, or the mess that this world is. You can’t fix it. You can’t solve the problems. The things that trouble you the most in your life, you are powerless to overcome. And so we must cease from our fretting. We must cease from our fruitless labors, from our foolish attempts to control all our trials. We must cease from our unproductive strategies to reform ourselves in our strength. None of that will do. None of that will actually save us.

What we need to do is simply rest in the good news of the gospel. I want to plead with you this morning to rest, to trust, to believe. Some of you are so frazzled by the pace of life, so burdened by hardships, so sad because things haven’t gone the way you want them to, so weary of life’s labors. I exhort you today to rest in the gospel. Rest in God’s powerful deliverance. Put your hope in Him.

John G. Paton was a pioneer missionary to the New Hebrides islands where he worked on translating the Bible into the language of the natives there. And as he was living there among them learning their language, he would regularly scribble down words in his notebook as he heard them say things that would help him in translating the Bible into their language. As time went by, he realized that he was having trouble finding a word in their language for “faith.” That’s an important biblical word, but they didn’t have a word for it, as far as he could tell.

One day Paton was out on a hunting expedition with some of the men, and it was a long and tiring journey. Finally, they got a deer and brought it back. And they all flopped down in

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<sup>1</sup> Romans, page 144.

exhaustion. And one of the men said, “My, it is good to stretch yourself out here and rest.” Paton jumped up with his notebook, and told the man to repeat that statement, and repeat it again, and again. He had found a concept that would help him translate the idea of “faith.” His translation of John 3:16 went like this, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever *stretches himself out on him* shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." This is what it is to believe. Find rest in Christ. Find hope in Him, because He has accomplished your salvation. Don't hope in your solution to the problems of life. Don't hope in the revenge you are planning against your enemies. Don't hope in your own schemes to get all the things you want out of life. Turn away from all those futile endeavors, and rest in the only One who can give you true hope and peace and rest.

The amazing thing in this verse is that this good news is for whoever *believes*. This is what is so astounding, and utterly unique, about the Christian faith. It is not by works. It doesn't say that whoever works for God will not perish but have eternal life, or whoever lives up to the standard, whoever comes to church regularly, whoever is a nice person. No, it says “whoever believes.”

Are you a believer? You may not have all of your questions figured out. You may be discouraged by the sin in your life. You may be burdened by trials. You may know very little about the Bible. But God's Word does not say that you have to clean up your life and have it all together and be able to pass a theological exam in order to be saved. It's for everyone who believes in Christ.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him. . .

### **Should Not Perish . . .**

And what is the gift for those who believe? It is the gift of escaping a tragic end, and instead receiving a triumphant and glorious inheritance. We should be careful to recognize that there are only these two destinations. Every person who has ever lived, every person who is now living, and every person who will live in the future in this world will end up either “perishing” or having “eternal life.” There's no third option. There's no other category. Either an eternity cast out of the Lord's presence, or an eternity drawn into His presence. Either forever in hell, or forever in heaven.

2 Thessalonians 1:9-10 provides a description of hell that should make us all take this very seriously. The verse is speaking of Christ's second coming when He will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. The Bible tells us that those individuals "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might . . ."

That's what it is to perish. Eternal, conscious torment away from the presence of the Lord. From the other passages about hell in the Bible, we know that this is not annihilation. It's not that these individuals cease to exist. That wouldn't be nearly as bad, actually. To perish is to be cast out of the Lord's presence and experience the misery of that condition without end. That's what our sin deserves.

But do you see the gift that is being offered to you right now in the Gospel? Whoever believes in Jesus will *not* perish but have eternal life!

### **But Have Eternal Life.**

In contrast to being cast out of the Lord's presence for all eternity, eternal life refers to the eternal life believers will have **IN** the Lord's presence. In Revelation 21, John has a glimpse of this amazing blessing we'll receive.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4, ESV)

Oh, doesn't that excite you! Not just the fact that there won't be any tears or death or mourning or crying or pain. But that we will be **WITH** our great God forever and ever. We will get to enjoy His presence eternally.

I was talking to one of the guys at the men's retreat yesterday who is just discouraged with life and trials. The way I tried to encourage him, and the way I try to encourage myself when I'm feeling down, is by looking to this great inheritance that is offered to us freely. Yeah, this world is broken. It's massively messed up, and so are we. But there's hope. There's hope for all who are believing in Jesus, that we will not perish but have eternal

life . . . eternal happiness in the presence of our great God and in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Maybe you have this verse memorized. John 3:16. Maybe you've recited this verse and heard it recited so many times, and it has become almost meaningless to you. I hope our reflections this morning have helped us all to see the wonderful and hope-filled message of this verse, which is the reason it is so often quoted and memorized. This week continue to consider the message of this verse, and be filled with hope and awe.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”