

For God So Loved the World
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John 3.14-21
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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.' One of the most remarkable football games I've ever seen was the John 3.16 game of 2012. It was all about Tim Tebow. You may remember that in 2009 Tebow had famously written John 3.16 on his face in eye black before the college football national championship. And then, three years later to the day, in 2012, he led the Broncos to a playoff victory over the heavily favored Steelers.

But what was really remarkable were the *stats* from that game. Tebow threw for 316 yards. His yards per completion were 31.6. The Steelers time of possession was 31 minutes and six seconds, the TV Nielsen ratings were 31.6 and perhaps most importantly, over 90 million people googled John 3.16.

Yes, this is the most famous verse in the Bible. And yet, many don't know what it means. Hence, 90 million google searches. And so today we're going to explore this single verse, and we're going to look at three aspects. We're going to look at:

- 1) The nature of God's love.
- 2) The nature of true faith.
- 3) The nature of eternal life.

First, God's love. *God so loved the world.* Now you might say, 'No kidding Sherlock, of course God loves the world. God is love. Everybody knows that?' But does everybody know that? Is the idea of God's love something that everyone has always believed?

You know, did the ancient philosophers believe God was love? No, Aristotle taught that God wasn't even aware of the world he sustained. How about ancient religions? I've been reading the Odyssey recently to my boys. And what we've discovered is that the gods have lots of emotions—passion, anger, vindictive jealousy, but unconditional love, not really. How about Eastern religions, like Buddhism? Well no, because they don't believe in a personal God, and love itself is considered an illusion you need to relinquish to be enlightened.

How about Islam? Islam talks a lot about God's mercy, but one of the distinctions is that Allah loves good people, NOT bad ones who reject Him. And so the Koran says, *'God loves not the unbelievers, the impious, the sinners, the evildoers, the proud, the transgressors, the prodigal, and the treacherous.'* And so this kind of love, in the words of William Lane Craig, is conditional, partial, and selective.

A marked *contrast* to *'God so loved the world.'* Because 'the world' here means not the physical earth, but human culture in rebellion against God. What this is saying is that God loves those who hate him. As Paul writes in Romans 5, *'God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'*

And so, while our culture takes God's love for granted, this idea is in fact utterly radical and revolutionary.

And this leads us to another important dimension of what love is and what it's not. We can also see here, that as a great band in the 70's once sang, love is MORE THAN A FEELING. Love is not just an attitude of benevolence, but it's *active and dynamic*. It's not vague and abstract. As Mike Mason writes, '*Love is always precise, always so terrifyingly and exultantly explicit.*' God loved and so God gave.

An awful example of this distinction is the 1964 murder of Kitty Genoveez. One of the famous crimes in America history. On March 13th, Kitty was mugged outside her apartment. Some of her neighbors heard her scream, and one of them yelled 'Leave that girl alone' and the mugger ran off. Another neighbor called the police and said 'There's a woman who got beat up and is staggering around.' *But no one came down to help Kitty.* And ten minutes later the mugger returned and took her life.

My friends, God so loved the world that he didn't stay in heaven and *wish us well*. He came down. And he plunged into the horrifying war zone which is the human condition. And he fought for us. And he died for us. God so loved the world that he gave what was most precious to Him. Not a prophet, not an angel, but His beloved son. Because love is more than a feeling. Point one.

Point two, the nature of faith. 'God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever *believes in Him* should not perish but have eternal life.' What does it mean to believe in God?

Well, just as love is not merely a *feeling*, faith is not merely *intellectual assent*. It's not just believing that something is true. It's actually putting your trust in it. So for example, how many of you have heard that George Washington was president of the United States? How many of you believe that is true? And how many of you are trusting in George Washington? That's good. Don't want any new religions starting at St. Michael's.

The point is, faith is not merely knowledge of something or intellectual assent. Rather, it's putting your trust in something.

The apostle James puts this bluntly. Writing to a bunch of Christians he says, '*You believe God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*' He's observing that even Satan and his demons believe in Jesus. And yet, as Pascal noted, '*The knowledge of God is very far from the love of Him.*'

So what this means, practically speaking, is that you could go to church every Sunday of your life. You could say the creed louder than anyone. You could read your Bible every day. You could be absolutely convinced that Jesus is the Son of God. And you could still go to hell when you die. If you haven't actually put your trust in Him.

What does it look like to put your trust in Jesus? It's right there earlier in chapter 3. Jesus says, '*As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believe in him may have eternal life.*'

You remember that OT story where there was a plague of poisonous snakes? And God told Moses to make a bronze sculpture of a snake and anyone who looked at the sculpture would be healed? Jesus is saying, if you're going to be saved you need to look to me *like that*—with the same kind of desperate hope that a dying, snake-bitten person would look to the antivenom.

As Thomas Merton wrote of the journey of faith, *‘The final step is...to completely abandon ourselves with confident joy to the apparent madness of the cross.’* So very candidly, my friends...I don’t care whether you raise your hands or kneel in church. I don’t care whether you like the organ or rock music. I don’t care whether you’re Baptist or Lutheran or Anglican, or whatever. But nothing in this universe matters more than whether you’ve thrown yourself upon the mercy of God.

And one more thing we see here about faith—it’s not a one-off moment, but rather, it’s a lifelong journey. The word translated ‘believe’ in English, is not a verb in the Greek but rather a participle, *‘believing.’* And so it means that faith must continue. As Jesus says in Matthew 10, *‘He who endures to the end will be saved.’* True faith endures.

The author Nik Ripken once interviewed a man who’d grown up in the Soviet Union when Christians were being persecuted. This man’s father had been a pastor. And he told the following story from his childhood. He said:

‘I remember the day like it was yesterday, Nik. My father put his arms around me and my sister...and guided us into the kitchen to sit around the table where he could talk with us. My Mama was crying, so I knew that something was wrong. Papa didn’t look at her because he was talking directly to us. He said, ‘Children, you know that I am the pastor of our church. That’s what God has called me to do—to tell others about Him. I have learned that the communist authorities will come tomorrow to arrest me. They will put me in prison because they want me to stop preaching about Jesus. But I cannot stop doing that because I must obey God. I will miss you very much, but I will trust God to watch over you while I’m gone.

He hugged each one of us. Then he said: ‘All around this part of the country, the authorities are rounding up followers of Jesus and demanding that they deny their faith. Sometimes, when they refuse the authorities will line up whole families and hang them by the neck until they are dead. I don’t want that to happen to our family, so I am praying that once they put me in prison, they will leave you and your mother alone. ‘However,’ and here he paused to make eye contact with us, ‘If I am in prison and I hear that my wife and my children have been hung to death rather than deny Jesus, I will be the most proud man in that prison.’

My friends, have we entrusted our lives to Christ? And is our faith the kind that will endure? This is a question every Christian should ask. And if the answer is no, please talk to one of the clergy. Because eternity is at stake.

And so we’ve looked at God’s love, we’ve looked at our faith. Let’s close by looking at eternal life. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him *should not perish but have eternal life.*’

Perishing vs. eternal life. This is life and death, this is heaven and hell. Now lots of people don’t believe in hell anymore. It can seem so quaint and primitive. As Herman Melville wrote, *‘Hell is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling; and since then perpetuated through hereditary dyspepsias.’* That is, hell is just a grumpy idea that comes from indigestion.

But no, Jesus talks about hell more than anyone in the Bible. And so if we think Jesus was a wise man who got a few things right, we might want to take what he said about hell seriously.

And the picture Jesus paints for us is scary. Fiery torment in a place where the worm doesn't die and where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. Bill Hyer observes that if someone in a Nazi prison camp died and went to hell, they would actually wish they were back in the camp. That's how bad Jesus says hell will be.

But the good news, is that anyone who believes in Jesus will not perish, but will have eternal life. And it's important to note here is that eternal life refers more to *quality* than to *quantity*. It's not a life that just goes on and on forever—that could be really boring. But no, eternal life is essentially the life of the Kingdom of God.

What does it look like? Luke 4 give us a glimpse. Here Jesus is beginning his ministry, and in the synagogue of Nazareth, he picks up the ancient scroll of Isaiah, and He reads, '*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He's sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*' Yes, this is eternal life—freedom, liberty, healing, restoration.

And then in the ultimate mic drop, Jesus says, '*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*' And so for anyone who is sick or sad or oppressed or depressed, Jesus is saying 'I've come to give you Life, abundant and eternal. I've come to give you joy that the world does not know and cannot take from you.'

I'm reminded of Richard Wurmbrandt. He was also imprisoned for many years in the Soviet Union. Tortured on an almost daily basis for his faith. He wrote this: '*Alone in my cell, cold, hungry and in rags, I danced for joy almost every night. Sometimes I was so filled with joy I felt I would burst if I did not give it expression.*'

You see Wurmbrandt knew the joy of eternal life. He knew that this eternal life, was not just a whimsical hope, but an anchor that holds in the hurricanes of life. How did he know this? Because he knew that God's love is not just a feeling but an action.

It's interesting that when Jesus reads the passage from Isaiah he doesn't read the whole thing. Strikingly, he cuts it off mid-verse. The full passage ends '*To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God.*' Why does Jesus leave out the bit about vengeance? Because God so loved the world. And Jesus came not to bring the vengeance of God, but to bear the vengeance of God. Jesus came to perish so that you and I wouldn't. Jesus came to experience hell, separation from God—crying out '*My God my God why have you forsaken me*'—so that we could run home into the arms of the Father.

And it's when we see God's love, blazing forth from the cross, Jesus high and lifted up for us, that true faith is born, that eternal life begins, and we can exult with the apostle, 'The old has gone, the new has come, I am a new creation in Christ.'

May it be so. May it be so for some of us today. May we step into eternal life. For Jesus' sake. Amen.