

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

John 3:16-36

Key Verse: 3:16

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

Martin Luther referred to John 3:16 as “the essence of the gospel.” In fact, it tells us the key point of the entire Bible. Primarily it tells us of God's love. There are many attributes of God which the Bible tells us of: holiness, righteousness, justice, faithfulness, compassion, mercy, kindness, generosity, infinity, eternity, omnipresence, omniscience, omnipotence, and so on. But among them, love and holiness are most significant. In fact, the Bible tells us **“God is love”** and **“God is holy.”** In essence, God is holy love. When we engage with people, we find that each one has their own concept of God based on their unique experiences, knowledge and understanding. In the book of Job, Job’s friends thought they understood God based on cause and effect. They insisted to suffering Job that he was guilty of sin and that God was carrying out justice by punishing him. When God revealed himself as he is, their concept of God was shown to be wrong. Like them, many of us also have a wrong concept of God. Some think God is a legalistic bureaucrat whose main job is to critique our performance and judge us. Others think God is an indifferent and abusive parent. Still others think God is like a grandparent who only spoils his children. And some even think God is a ruthless tyrant, like Hitler. But this is not the understanding of God which the Bible advances. The Bible is the book God has given to reveal himself to us. We need to listen to what the Bible teaches us about God. Today’s passage tells us that God so loved the world. Let’s listen to God’s beautiful love story.

First, God's motive in sending his Son into world (16a). When Nicodemus did not accept Jesus' testimony (11-12), Jesus taught him the way of salvation. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so Jesus must be lifted up (14). Then Jesus explained why God sent his one and only Son and for what purpose. Let’s read verse 16. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** Here, **“the world”** refers to **people in the world - not lovely, noble and prestigious people, but all sinners in the world without exception. We are nasty, ugly, proud, rebellious, argumentative, violent, immoral, selfish, greedy, unthankful and so on. It is really hard to love such people.** If we try to love one such person, we find it very difficult. But in reality, we are that person to God. But God never abandoned us. God loved us so much that he sent his one and only Son to die for our sins. God

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didn't merely say, "I love you." God's love was not limited to feelings. God demonstrated his love for us factually in history. God sacrificed what was most precious and valuable to him in order to save us, who are so ugly due to our sins that we deserved to perish eternally. Paul says in Romans 8:32, **"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things."** God sent Jesus as our Savior out of his great love. We should believe this love of God no matter what our situation or condition.

However, we often feel unworthy of love. We cannot love a person like ourselves, so we feel that no one can love us. We may think that God loves the world, but not me. We may think that among seven billion people in the world, "I don't matter." Yet in truth, God's love extends to each and every individual person, as though we are the only person in the world. When we know that "God loves me" we can find our identity as a dear child of God and have peace and joy in our hearts and overcome all kinds of hardships. A tornado struck the city of Moore, Oklahoma recently. One survivor said it sounded like a giant blender with 7,000 spoons. As it approached an elementary school, Ms. Waynel Mayes, a first-grade teacher, led her students in singing, "Jesus Loves Me." Not knowing if they would live or die, she wanted them to think of Jesus and trust his love. The children sang with all their hearts and tried to sing louder than the storm. Though their building was completely demolished, Ms. Mayes and her eight students were pulled out alive. At the memorial service a week later, they sang, "Jesus Loves Me" again, this time with other students. As they did, the love of God comforted the hearts of many who were mourning loss. It seemed that nothing could comfort the citizens of Moore, but the love of Jesus did.

A young woman was abandoned by her father when he started another family. She demanded his love, thinking, "I was here first, before your new wife and your new kids." But it was to no avail. After that, her heart ached for the love of a father. She met an older man who seemed to give her everything she ever wanted and fell in love with him. But he was so controlling that she could not live a normal life. Finally, without warning, he abandoned her too. She felt that no one could love her for who she was. But when she came to Jesus, she found true love, love that is real, unconditional and unchanging. Since she feels deeply and personally loved, she has the strength to live a meaningful life, overcoming hardship. This is true not only for her, but for anyone who believes in Jesus.

Though God loves us so much, the devil tries to plant in our hearts doubt about God's love, and fear, to keep us from believing God's love personally. When

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we face trouble, we can easily doubt God's love, thinking, "If God loves me, why did he give me such trouble?" If we doubt God's love, we become more and more estranged from God. We gradually lose strength and power to overcome hardships, and even lose the meaning and purpose of life. We become like a branch cut off from the vine. However, when we hold on to God's love in the midst of difficulties, we can take root in God's love more deeply. When we face difficulties we can think based on God's love: "God loves me. That is why this difficulty has come." Then we can grow in the love of God.

Recently, Dr. Joseph Chung was found to have kidney stones. Then M. Esther Chung was found to have a mass in her thyroid while being diagnosed on a new machine at the Bethesda Mission Hospital. At first they thought, "We wish that this new equipment had not come so that we might not have received this bad news." Then Romans 8:28 began to come to their hearts: **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."** As they held on to God's love, it was found that M. Esther's mass was benign. Soon, Dr. Joseph passed his kidney stones successfully, saying, "they jumped out of my body." They both became strong enough to make the long journey from Kampala, Uganda to Entebbe, Amsterdam, Detroit and Chicago, carrying four big bags. When we believe God loves us, even in the time of hardship, not only do we overcome hardships, we grow in his love. Let's not doubt God's love when we face difficulties; rather, let's hold on to God's love.

Second, God's purpose in sending his Son (16b-21). Verse 16b says, **"...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."** All people were doomed to perish because of our sins. This was a painful consequence which God foretold at the Fall, saying, **"...for dust you are and to dust you will return"** (Gen 3:19). Our lives can be condensed as follows: study hard to get a good job and marry; work hard to raise children and support a family, paying a mortgage; enjoy a few moments of pleasure; get old and die, using one's savings to pay for the funeral. But it gets worse: after death there is judgment and eternal condemnation (Heb 9:27). This is the destiny of all people without exception, be they rich or poor, educated or not educated, social elites or ordinary folks. And there is nothing we can do to change this. But God sent Jesus into the world as our Savior, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Eternal life is not like an insurance policy that takes effect when we die. It begins the moment we believe in Jesus (5:24). It is a relationship with God, who is the source of life (17:3). It is a life rich with meaning and abundant in fruitfulness in

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which we experience new mercies and joys every day, and it continues into eternity. What a great blessing God has freely given us from his love!

Still, it is not easy to accept the fact that God saved us and gives us eternal life free of charge. We like the words “free of charge.” However, we know that in this world there is no “free of charge.” There is always a string attached. So we can doubt that it is really free of charge. Isn’t there some string attached? No. It is really, really free of charge. Don’t doubt it. All we need to do is trust God and accept this by faith. Verse 17 says, **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** We are familiar with being condemned. Once I was falsely charged and had to stand before a judge. Though I was innocent, it was so painful to receive condemnation. But before God there is no one righteous. God knows all of our sins and mistakes in detail and could condemn us justly. We deserve it. However, when we just believe in Jesus, amazing things happen. We are freed from condemnation and become glorious children of God. Romans 8:1 says, **“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus....”** This is God’s promise to whoever believes in him (18a). But those who do not believe in him stand condemned already (18b).

Verses 19-21 well explain why people do not believe in Jesus. Of course, people make many excuses: they are too young to believe in Jesus now, too terrible to be accepted, disillusioned by hypocrites in the church, or too good to perish eternally. But the real problem is that they love the darkness instead of the light because their deeds are evil (19). They are terrified to come into the light because they hate the light, not wanting their sinful deeds exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God (21). Here we can see that not believing in Jesus is not an intellectual problem, but a matter of loving darkness. We can also see that those who love the truth will come into the light of Jesus.

Third, John testifies about Jesus (22-36). After his meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside (22a). There, Jesus spent time with them and baptized (22b). John the Baptist was also baptizing at Aenon near Salim. God’s history was in transition from John’s ministry to that of Jesus. In the past, John had been very popular. As his ministry grew, his disciples became happy. But now, his ministry began to wane, while Jesus’ ministry grew and grew. To make things more difficult, an argument developed between John’s disciples and a certain Jew. Perhaps he told them that their baptism was not

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legitimate in light of the laws of ceremonial washing. So they came to John and said, **“Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan - the one you testified about - look, he is baptizing and everyone is going to him”** (26). John’s disciples revealed their real inner problem. They felt a sense of inferiority and even jealousy toward Jesus’ growing ministry.

John's reply, in verses 27-36, contains several important teachings. In the first place John accepted God’s sovereignty over his ministry. Verses 27-28 read, **“To this John replied, ‘A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, “I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.””** John knew that everything comes from God. Therefore, we should not see our ministry from a human point of view and compare it with others. Each ministry comes from God and has an absolute value. For example, missionaries in Muslim countries have very little possibility to bear visible fruit. It is very presumptuous to judge them on such a basis. Rather, we should see that their faith and hope in the kingdom of God are admirable. We should each accept God’s sovereignty over the ministry he has given us and do our best to please him without comparing it to others. When Missionary Isaac Choi started Children’s Bible Fellowship, it was considered like an appendix in the college student ministry of UBF. But he accepted God’s sovereignty and did his best to please God, caring for everyone else’s children for more than 30 years. These days we can see that CBF has grown and developed into a most important part of this church.

In the second place, John knew the secret of joy. He said, **“The bride belongs to the bridegroom”** (29a). Jesus is the bridegroom and all people who come to him are his bride. John was **“the friend who attends the bridegroom,”** like a “best man” (29b). When the bridegroom is united to his bride, the best man observes from a distance and shares the bridegroom’s joy. John was full of joy when people came to Jesus (29c). He concluded by saying, **“He must become greater; I must become less”** (30). John did not fall into sorrow as Jesus was exalted and he became less and less. Rather, he was full of joy because to him, Jesus was always first and he was second. We find many people these days who share the same joy John had in exalting Jesus. Some have formed a movement called “I am second,” and have a website Iamsecond.com. It contains many testimonies of people who met Jesus personally, put him first and themselves second, and found true joy. When we put ourselves first, many miseries and sorrows come. But when Jesus is first, we can have real joy. Many people among

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us have experienced this. Perhaps we can make our own website called “I am third.”

In the third place, John explains why he exalts Jesus. Fundamentally, Jesus came from above and everyone else came from the earth. So Jesus is above all. Even though Jesus incarnated and became a man, his origin was heaven. That means he is God. Jesus is not just a great teacher or an example of a perfect man. Jesus is, in very nature, God. When he testifies, it is not just one reasonable idea among many, it is the very word of God. Those who humbly accept Jesus' testimony can come to know that God is truthful and his word is true. This is because Jesus speaks the words of God, for God gave him the Spirit without limit. The Father entrusted Jesus with the authority to judge and to save men (35). Therefore, **“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them”** (36). To believe in Jesus or reject Jesus is a matter of eternal life or eternal condemnation.

Let's read John 3:16 one more time: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** God is love. God loved us so much that he gave his one and only Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Therefore, we cannot doubt the love of God. When we accept the love of God in our hearts, all kinds of sorrows and darkness disappear, and we are filled with joy and happiness. This is because **there is no fear in love; in fact, perfect love drives out fear** (1 Jn 4:18). When we accept the love of God deeply into our hearts, we can overcome any life challenges and live victoriously. So Paul says, **“For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us”** (Ro 8:36-37). Human beings are created to be loved by God and to love God. Without the love of God no one can be truly satisfied. So people are looking for the love of God desperately. Many cry because they do not know the love of God. Let's pray that we may receive the love of God and serve the world with God's love. When we do so, we will be truly happy.