

INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, John 3:16 is the most familiar verse in all of the Bible. The reference has been displayed in so many different public ways. In the 1980s there was a guy who wore a rainbow-colored wig who seemed to show up at every major sporting event. He was nicknamed "the Rainbow Man." For years he managed to get himself on camera holding up a sign that said, "John 3:16." He would sit behind home plate, or behind the goal posts, or the backboard and wave his sign. He was really more of a sports nut and a publicity junkie than a sincere evangelist. He was actually more of a nut, because now he's serving a life sentence in California due to an eight-hour stand-off with Los Angeles SWAT team after he kidnapped a hotel maid at gunpoint.

But it wasn't just the Rainbow Man. Who can forget seeing Tim Tebow with John 3:16 on his eye black when he played football? It was first seen nationally when he wore it at the 2009 National Championship game when Florida defeated Oklahoma. Tebow later said he was told that 94 million people Googled "John 3:16" during the game. And in 2012 Tebow led the Broncos to an overtime playoff victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers. The newspaper made reference to John 3:16 and observed that he threw for 316 yards and his average yards per completion was 31.6 yards.

And there's a great burger chain out of California called "In-N-Out Burger" that prints John 3:16 on the bottom of all their cups. And clothing company Forever 21, based in Los Angeles, prints John 3:16 on the bottom of their bags.

Someone said that John 3:6 is "The Gospel in a nutshell." But we are so familiar with it that sometimes familiarity breeds—not contempt, but complacency. In order to appreciate it, we need to place it in its proper context. In John 3, a religious Jew named Nicodemus visited Jesus at night and commented that God must be with Him because of the miracles He was performing. Jesus told this highly moral and religious man, "Nicodemus, unless you are born again, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Jesus taught that we are all born physically, but we need another birth, a spiritual birth in order to see God.

Then let's pick up the conversation in John 3:14-16 CSB.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

Many of us memorized John 3:16 in the King James Version. So let's quote it together. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

There is a ton of truth in that one statement, but I want us to just focus on the part that says, "For God so loved." I want to talk about the Love of God, the most powerful force in the universe.

Think about the object of God's love: the world. That's the word *kosmos*. The world doesn't mean the world of nature, or the world of wildlife. The word *kosmos* is used in the Bible to describe people who are doing their own thing and aren't seeking God. He loves those kinds of people. Nicodemus had to have been shocked. He knew that God loved His chosen people of Israel, but the idea that God loved even sinners was a revolutionary thought.

As we dig into the Love of God, I want to use five words that describe God's love.

1. GOD'S LOVE IS UNDESERVED.

Sometimes we spend much of our lives trying to earn the love of others. Maybe you had a father or mother who didn't offer love freely and you thought there was something you could do to earn their love. Sometimes people feel that way about God. They think there is something they can do to earn God's love. They think if they perform enough religious acts, or good deeds then they will be worthy of God's love.

The Bible says, "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8 CSB) God didn't say, "When you obey the Ten Commandments perfectly, you can earn my love." He didn't say, "When you follow the Sermon on the Mount, you can earn my love. No, thankfully, He loved us while we were still sinners and sent His son to die for you.

God's undeserved love can be illustrated by a story that many of us first heard as children. There was a sinful tax collector named Zacchaeus who lived in Jericho. He was a short guy, but he was very rich. He ran a company called the IRS which stood for I'm Rich and Short. He cheated people because the Roman government backed him and he could charge as much taxes as he wanted, then he would give the Romans what they needed and kept the rest for himself. So he was a mean, selfish, money-grabbing crook. Just the kind of person that Jesus loves.

So there we see Zach out on a limb for Jesus. And Jesus stopped and looked up and spoke to Him. He said, "Hey Zach. Come down. I want to visit with you in your house." So Zach jumped down and went with Jesus. We don't know what happened inside Zach's house, but knowing the rules of hospitality, there probably was a meal. I don't think Jesus said, "Zach, you're a dirty rotten cheat, and you'd better change your ways if you want my Father to love you." No, Jesus showed his love for Zach. And after the meal Zach said, "I'm a changed man. I'm given all my wealth to the poor, and for those I've cheated, I'll pay you back four times as much."

Jesus knew Zach's name and his needs although they'd never met. He knows your name and your needs today as well. Are you out on a limb today? Jesus loves you and says, "Come with me." You'd better accept his invitation. Because if you stay up on that limb one day the devil

may come up with a saw and cut that limb off—and then you'll be dead—under the sod without God.

2. GOD'S LOVE IS UNCONDITIONAL.

There are many human relationships where we give or take love based upon conditions. Bad parents often say something like, "If you will clean up your room, mommy will love you." Or "If you pass the test or win the game, daddy will love you." That's bad parenting.

In bad marriages, there is often the barter of conditional love. "I love you when you buy me things." Or "I will love you when you stop cussing—or when you stop nagging." Or the worst is, "I'll love you when you show me that you love me."

But God's love for sinners is perfect—it is unconditional. It doesn't depend on how we act or react. The Bible says, "Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10 CSB)

God says, "I love you." No "if's" or "but's." God loves us in our dirty sinful condition. In Revelation 1:5 the Bible says Jesus loves us and washes us from our sins. Notice the order. He loves us, then He washes us. He doesn't say, "I got to wash you before I love you." No God loves us in our dirty sinful condition.

A hillbilly mother who lived up in the mountains had 12 kids and one of her boys got stuck in the swamp and was covered in mud, then he ran across a skunk and came wandering back home dirty and stinking. The mother was out in the yard with her washtub when her boy came dragging in. When she saw her son she said, "I declare I think it would be easier just to have another son than to clean this one up!"

I'm so glad God doesn't say that to us. God says, "I love you just the way you are."

Now, this doctrine of God's unconditional love has been abused by some. In a day when moral lines have been blurred, some people think they can live in ways in which the Bible forbids and still claim to be loved by God. After all, God's love is unconditional. They think it gives them a license to live any way they choose and still claim that God loves them. God does love sinners, but when a person accepts God's love, He will change them. He will wash them.

So it IS true that God loves you just the way you are. Turn to someone beside you and say, "God loves you just the way you are." But it's also true that God loves you too much to let you stay the way you are. Now turn and say, "God loves you too much to let you stay the way you are."

His love changes us.

3. GOD'S LOVE IS UNSURPASSED.

It is the greatest love in the universe. Whitney Houston grew up singing gospel music in New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey. God gifted her with a powerful voice. One of her most popular songs was entitled, "The Greatest Love." In the song she said that she had discovered that the greatest love of all is loving herself. But having grown up in church, I believe she knew deep down inside that the greatest love of all is the love that God has for all sinners.

In one of the greatest prayers in the New Testament, Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus to be able to comprehend the scope of God's love. He wrote, "I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:17-19 CSB)

There have been many great love stories in history. The famous English author, Charles Dickens, published a series of books entitled *A Child's History of England*. In these volumes he told stories about the royalty and leaders in England's history. One of the greatest leaders of England was Thomas Becket, who was the Bishop of Canterbury from 1118-1170. Dickens weaves the amazing love story of the parents of Thomas Becket. Thomas' father was named Gilbert, and he traveled to the Holy Land on one of the ill-fated Crusades. He and his servant Richard were captured by the Muslim ruler and put in prison. Because Gilbert was an educated man, he was often released from prison to visit the Muslim ruler and his family. The Muslim ruler had one daughter and over time, Gilbert and the princess fell in love. She wanted to convert to Christianity and marry Gilbert and return to England.

However, their plans were changed when one night Gilbert and Richard were rescued from prison. He left without even being able to speak to his princess. They made their way back to England, and Gilbert had resigned himself that he would never see her again.

However, the Muslim princess devised a daring plan. She determined to leave the Holy Land and find her true love. She had only learned two words in English, "London" and "Gilbert." So she disguised herself as a beggar and found her way to the seaport of Joppa. She walked around the ships and kept saying, "London, London, London." Finally she was shown a ship traveling to London. She sold some of her jewels to make passage on the ship.

After many months of traveling, she finally arrived in London, but she was out of money and had no idea how to find Gilbert. So she wandered the streets shouting, "Gilbert! Gilbert!" One day while conducting business, Gilbert's assistant Richard heard her crying out. And he returned to Gilbert and pointed her out. At this point, let me read the words of Dickens: "Then, he took Gilbert by the sleeve, and pointed out of window; and there they saw her among the gables and water-spouts of the dark, dirty street, in her foreign dress, so forlorn, surrounded by a wondering crowd, and passing slowly along, calling 'Gilbert, Gilbert!' When Gilbert saw her, and thought of the tenderness she had shown him in his captivity, and of her constancy, his heart was moved, and he ran down into the street; and she saw him coming, and with a great

cry fainted in his arms. They were married without loss of time, and Richard danced with joy the whole day of the wedding; and they all lived happy ever afterwards." Her love for Gilbert was so great that no barrier of distance or cost could keep them apart.

You may be thinking, "I wish there was someone who loved me that much." My friend, there is someone who traveled further and paid more to bring you God's love. Jesus came to planet earth with your name on His heart. That kind of love is unsurpassed in the history of the world.

4. GOD'S LOVE IS UNSELFISH.

If I asked you what is the opposite of love, you might say, "hate." But in the Bible, the opposite of *agape*, God's love, isn't hate. It's selfishness. I often share this point when I'm performing a wedding ceremony. I tell the groom that the more unselfish he is toward his wife, the more loving he will be. And I tell the bride, the more unselfish she is to her husband, the more loving she will be.

In 1 John the Bible says, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him." (1 John 4:9 CSB)

As you know I love Biblical art. A few years ago our family was visiting St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It is always crowded. Before we left, I was exploring some of the tiny chapels, single rooms built in the sides of the Cathedral. I was the only one inside a tiny chapel that had an amazing sculpture of the Crucifixion of Christ. The thing that made this depiction unique was the agonizing expression on the face of Jesus. The look of pain was frozen into the carved marble. But it was the inscription below the cross that really got my attention. It simply said, "This is how much God loves you."

If you want to know how much God loves you, don't look at a flower or a beautiful sunset. Look to the cross. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13 RSV) God's love is unselfish and we see that in the cross.

5. GOD'S LOVE IS UNENDING.

When it comes to human love, people speak of falling in and out of love. But God will never fall in and out of love with you. His love endures forever. We find this wonderful promise in Lamentations that gives us the inspiration for one of my favorite hymns, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23 ESV)

I shared a love story from Charles Dickens a little earlier. The Bible is full of love stories as well. Starting this Wednesday evening I'll resume WEBS here in the Worship Center. The new study is "Meet the Prophets." One of the prophets we'll be studying is the prophet Hosea. It's one of the greatest love stories in history.

Let's go back in time 2,800 years. God told Hosea, "I've got a girl picked out for you to marry. Her name is Gomer." I imagine Hosea said, "Oh boy!" God said, "There's just one thing, Hosea, she is a prostitute." And Hosea probably said, "Hmm. Okay." And then God said, "You'll have kids, but eventually she will be unfaithful to you and your kids and run away from home." And even though he didn't understand at the time why he was to marry Gomer, he obeyed God. He married Gomer. Perhaps he hoped that his love for her would prevent her from returning to a life of prostitution. They had three children, two boys and a girl. For several years, it looked as if God was wrong about her, and they were a happy family. But one morning Hosea walked into the kitchen and found that Gomer had left.

We don't know how long Gomer was separated from Hosea, and we don't know how many men she welcomed into her arms, but there is evidence her life spiraled out of control. Because the next time we see Gomer she is a slave being sold at an auction. She was nothing but property to be bought and sold by evil men.

Then God told Hosea to go to the slave auction and buy his wife back. He paid all the money he had and the auctioneer said, "Sold!" So Hosea took her home. Now that he had her what would he do?

According to the Mosaic Law, he had the right to accuse her publicly and have her stoned to death. That would have restored his public standing as a man of righteousness. Or he could have taken her and said, "You lived like a slave, so I'm going to make you a slave. You're going to work your fingers to the bone from sunup to sundown to repay what it cost me to buy you." But instead Hosea tenderly approached Gomer and wrapped his robe around her nakedness. He said, "Sweetheart, I know what you've done, and I forgive you. I still love you. Will you come back home and be my wife and a mother to your children?"

You say, "What a love story!" But when you read the rest of the book of Hosea you realize that this story is just a picture of how much God loves and redeems us even though we are rebellious and sinful. God's love for sinners is the greatest love story of history.

CONCLUSION

So, what have we learned? You are deeply loved by your Creator. But you may not be experiencing the benefits of God's great love. That's where the rest of John 3:16 becomes important. God's part was the most difficult. God so loved the world that He gave his one and only son—but it is up to us to accept God's love. So that whoever believes in him, trusts Him, will never perish but have everlasting life.

The take-away truth is this: You must keep yourself in God's love. There is a powerful admonition found in the little book of Jude near the back of the New Testament. The Bible says, "But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." (Jude 20-21 ESV)

The word "keep" is descriptive of a fortress. We are told that once we have experienced God's love we must remain in the protection and shadow of God's love. It's like there's a circle where we experience the benefits of God's love. God's love reaches to the edges of the universe, but the circle of his blessing is where we experience His blessings. We must remain in that circle of blessings.

Let me illustrate that using an example from parenting. I am a father to two wonderful daughters. When they were growing up, they were basically well-behaved children. There was never a moment from the time they were born until today that I haven't loved them. But there were a few times when they didn't experience the benefits of my love. I won't go into specific examples, but on several occasions they displayed rebellion and disobedience. Our fellowship wasn't that wonderful at times; they might have even thought I didn't love them. They just weren't experiencing the benefits of my love. But all our lives were better when they kept themselves in my love.

My friend, God loves you, that's for certain. But have you stepped away from the circle of His blessing? God's love is like sunshine—it's there—but don't blame God if you choose to stand in the shade.

Some of you have never been born again. I have a message for you. God loves you so much that He sent His son Jesus to die on the cross for your sins. Will you trust Him? If you will, you won't perish—you'll experience eternal life.

Many of you have received God's gift of eternal life in Jesus and God is telling you today: Keep yourselves in the love of God.

Maybe you are a believer who once experienced the benefits of God's love but you have moved outside the circle of the benefits of His love. God has a word for you today: Get back into the circle of blessing. Come back to Jesus and start obeying and serving Him. And once again you can start enjoying the benefits of God's love—the most powerful force in the Universe.

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Take-away Truth: Keep yourself in God's love!

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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