

## INTRODUCTION

The world has really changed over the last century. In 1878, the nation of Egypt was stable and a good friend of England and America. In fact, Egypt made a gift to England of a 3,000-year-old stone column with hieroglyphics written on all four sides. Although it didn't date to Cleopatra's time, it was named Cleopatra's Needle. It was such a great occasion that the British placed it in a prominent park beside the Thames River. When they dedicated Cleopatra's needle, they added a time capsule at the base. Inside the time capsule, they placed a variety of important items. So if in the future, someone should open the time capsule, here are some of the items they'll find: pictures of 12 of the prettiest women in England, one of them being 60-year-old Queen Victoria. There's a box of cigars, a baby's bottle, a set of British coins, a map of London, and copies of ten British newspapers. They also formed a special committee to include the greatest verse in the Bible, and this committee unanimously chose John 3:16. So inside the vault is John 3:16 written in 215 different languages, which was how many written languages were known at the time. Today, John 3:16 has been translated into 1,200 languages.

In John 3 there is a very religious man by the name of Nicodemus who came to see Jesus at night. It was the original Nick at night. Nick wanted to know how Jesus was doing all the miracles He was performing. But Jesus told Nicodemus that even though he was a religious guy, He had to be born again. He had already been born physically, like we all have. But Jesus said there is another kind of birth, a spiritual birth. It's like starting over in life. Has that ever happened to you? Apparently Nick got the message, because after Jesus died on the cross, do you know who was there to help put Jesus in the tomb? Nicodemus. So, religion won't get you into heaven. You must be born again—spiritually. Later in that same chapter, the Bible explains what it means to be born again and we read what many people believe to be the most important verse in the Bible, John 3:16. Let's read it and a couple of verses with it.

John 3:16-18. "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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Billy Graham's daughter, Anne Graham Lotz, has written that John 3:16 is the North Star of the Bible. You can align your life with it and find your way home.

There are three hundred different philosophical "isms" in the English language. And John 3:16 refutes many of the faulty isms. For instance, it refutes Atheism, which says there is no God because this verse says, "For God." Fatalism says there is no personal involvement of a higher power in the Universe, everything happens according to fate. But John 3:16 tells us there is a God who so loved. Racism says some races are better and more highly favored, but this verse says that God loved the world. Materialism says life is all about getting, more and more and more. But this verse says God so loved that He gave. Legalism says you go to heaven by being good and doing good, but this verse says you go to heaven by trusting in God's one and only Son. Universalism says ultimately everyone will go to heaven, and this verse emphasizes that only those that believe go to heaven. Pluralism says all religions are the same and there are many

paths to God, but this verse says that salvation is only in Him—Jesus. Pessimism says life is hopeless for everyone but this verse says you don't have to perish. Humanism says there is no God and this life is all there is, but John 3:16 promises that we can have eternal life.

Vance Havner used to say that most of these “isms” in the world should become “wasims.” And thank God, because of John 3:16, we're not saved by an ism, we're saved by grace through faith.

Let's dig deeper in this verse and learn more about this God who loves you. Let me tell you four ways God loves you.

### **1. GOD'S LOVE IS UNIVERSAL. “For God so loved the world...”**

When we were in school we learned to diagram sentences; every sentence has a subject and a verb. The subject of the verse is God. The verb is loved. Ancient cultures had a god for everything. There was a god of war, a god of pleasure; a god of the sun and a god for the moon. It was like the song Old McDonald, “Here a god there a god everywhere a god god.”

But none of these gods were ever believed to LOVE humanity. But there is one God, the true God who loves people. Although we don't translate it, there's a definite article before the word “God.” So it should be translated, “for THE God—the true God—the ONE God. The God of the Bible is a God of love. 1 John 4:8 says it simply, “God is love.”

The little word “so” is a grammatical tool that means He keeps on loving; He never stops. It could be translated, “God loved the world in such an intense manner...”

A couple came home after leaving their young daughter with a new babysitter. When the parents returned home, the child was crying. They asked, “Why are you crying?” Between sniffles she said, “Because the babysitter told me that if I didn't behave that you wouldn't love me.” They quickly assured the child that they loved her no matter how she acted, and they never hired that babysitter again. That's how God loves you. He loves you even when you've misbehaved.

We all know the first verse of the famous children's song: Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so; Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong.”

But there's another verse that says, “Jesus loves me when I'm good; When I do the things I should. Jesus loves me when I'm bad; Even though it makes Him sad.”

God's love for you is unconditional; it's not fickle, depending on your behavior. I recently saw a copy of child's love letter. It said, “Dear Ashley, Would you please be my girlfriend? I like you a lot. Please put yes no or maybe. Ashley circled no, but she added, “I'm sorry I already have a boyfriend Kyle, but when we break up you're my next choice. PS that will probably be a month or two.”

God's love isn't like puppy love; it is constant and unwavering. Some sentences have a subject, verb, and object. The object of this verse is “the world.” It's not talking about the planet earth. It's not talking about the world of nature. It means the world of people—the entire human race.

There are over 7 billion people living today. If you could put them in a line and have them walk in front of God, He would look each person in the eye and say, “I love you.”

## 2. GOD’S LOVE IS UNSELFISH. “...that He gave His one and only Son...”

We use the English word “love” in many ways. We say, “I love my children. I love my spouse. I love peanut butter. I love football.” The New Testament was originally written in Greek, which has different words for different kinds of love. There was a word, *eros*, which means sexual love. We have an English word erotic from it. That is the kind of love that takes. And the word *eros* never appears in the Bible. There was another word for love, *phileo*, which was a social love. The city Philadelphia literally means the city of brotherly love. The word *phileo* does appear in the Bible. This kind of love is a give and take kind of love.

But the highest form of love is *agape*, spiritual love. It is the word used here, and it is a love that doesn’t give and take. It is a love that GIVES.

So what did God give? Think about it, if God wanted to send someone special to planet earth, He had some choices. There are lots of different kinds of angels. He could have sent cherubim, or seraphim, or Michael, the archangel. But instead, He chose to give us the most precious One person God knew, His Son.

He is called, “His one and only Son.” Most of us memorize this verse in the King James Version that says that God gave His only begotten son. But we don’t use that old word very much. In fact, when I was first learning this verse as a child my parents told me I said, “His only FORGOTTEN Son.”

It’s the word *mono-genea*. *Mono* means, “one.” We have English words like “monopoly” and “monorail” and “mononucleosis.” The word *genea* means “birth.” We get our English words, “genetics” and “genes” from it. Jesus was a one-of-a-kind birth. When Jesus was born, it was like the invisible God taking on human form.

The Bible says in 1 Timothy 3:16, “Without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.” (KJV) There in the stable in Bethlehem the infinite became an infant; the Creator became a creature. God became a little man in the manger.

Think about the birth of Jesus. He was the only person who ever walked the planet who had a heavenly father, but no heavenly mother. He had an earthly mother, but no earthly father. Here’s a riddle you can ask your friends. “Who was the only person ever born who was older than his mother and the same age as his father?” That would be Jesus.

Max Lucado wrote, “If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your picture would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He’ll always listen. He could live anywhere in the universe, and He chose your heart. What about that Christmas gift He sent you in Bethlehem? Face it my friend, He’s crazy about you.” (*Prayer: A Heavenly Invitation*)

That's how much God loves you. He gave His Son. Do you remember when you were a child and you had a crush? You might have picked a flower and started pulling the petals. "She loves me. She loves me not. She loves me. She loves me not." Even if I had to pull two petals at once, I would always rig it so the last petal was "She loves me."

On the cross, God didn't have to rig it. Every drop of our Savior's blood said, "I love you. I love you. I love you."

### **3. GOD'S LOVE IS PERSONAL. "...that whoever believes in him..."**

In the first part of the verse, God is the subject of the verbs "Loved" and "gave." But now, the attention turns to you and me. The word "whoever" actually means everyone and anyone. I am a whoever; and you are a whoever.

The next word to understand is the word "believe." The best translation of that word is "trust." The noun of trust is faith. Through the years I've had people say that they just don't have faith. But people exercise faith every day. When you sit down and eat a meal you didn't prepare, you're trusting that the cook didn't put poison in it. When you get on a plane, you're trusting the aircraft manufacturer and the skill of the pilot. Every time you send an email, you trust it will be delivered. When you sit in a chair, you trust it to hold you up. That's what it means to believe in Jesus. It doesn't mean just believing the facts about Jesus. You can give mental affirmation to the fact that there was a historical character named Jesus who was born in Bethlehem and was crucified in Jerusalem. But you must be willing to trust him just as you trust a chair that you sit.

One of the greatest cartoon series ever created was VeggieTales. It was about a bunch of really funny talking vegetables. Every video taught a great moral lesson. At the end of every original VeggieTales, Bob the Tomato would say, "Remember, kids, God made you special, and He loves you very much."

In 2006 NBC bought the rights and started broadcasting VeggieTales, but they removed any reference to God, including the ending. But I think Bob the Tomato is smarter than the National Broadcasting Company because God DID make you special and He loves you very much.

### **4. GOD'S LOVE IS ETERNAL. "... shall not perish but have eternal life."**

John 3:16 begins with eternity and ends with eternity. It begins with God who has no beginning or ending, and it concludes with promise that you have a never-ending life.

There is one scary word in this verse. If John 3:16 is a beautiful bouquet of flowers, this one word is like a spring of poison ivy in the bouquet. If John 3:16 is like a delicious meal, this one word is like a poison mushroom on the plate. It is the word "perish."

The word "perish" reminds us there is a place in creation called hell. It's like the garbage dump of creation. It's like the death row prison of the universe. Jesus said in Matthew 25:41 that hell was created for the devil and his angels. It was never designed for human habitation. But then sin came into the world, and every sinner is holding a boarding pass to hell.

That's WHY God sent His one and only son in the world, not to condemn the sinners, but to save sinners. Only a sinless man could go to the cross and pay for the sins of the world, and Jesus is the only sinless person who ever lived. He never had a sinful thought; He never committed a sinful act.

John 3:16 shows us there are two possible eternal destinations. And God loves you so much that He sent Jesus so that no one HAS to perish; instead, we can have eternal life. There's a hinge of hope in the word, "but." Not perish BUT have eternal life. It's a choice God gives us.

You can choose heaven or hell. What will heaven be like? In his book, *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn says one of the blessings of heaven is what WON'T be there. He writes, "No death, no suffering. No funeral homes, abortion clinics or psychiatric wards. No rape, missing children, or drug rehab. No bigotry, no muggings, or killings. No worry or depression or economic downturns. No wars, no unemployment...close friendships, but no cliques; laughter, but no put-downs. Intimacy, but no temptation to immorality. No hidden agendas, no backroom deals, no betrayals."

Heaven will be wonderful, but the Christian life isn't just pie in the sky by and by. It's also steak on your plate while you wait. But did you notice the verb is in the present tense? It doesn't say you WILL have or MAY have or you MIGHT have eternal life. It says if you believe you will not perish but HAVE—right now—eternal life. But eternal life isn't just existing forever. It's a quality of life you can have now. In John 10:10 Jesus called the devil a thief and that Satan came to steal, kill, and destroy. Then Jesus said, "But I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly."

One of the most feared NFL linebackers in the NFL in the 1960s was a man named John Bramlett. His nickname was "Bull." He played for what was then called the Boston Patriots. He was known as the Meanest Man in Football, on and off the field. By his own admission he was a drunk and a carouser. He got in bar fights every week. If he had to play under the current NFL policies he would have been fined every week and suspended by the league. There are old videos of him hitting running backs and quarterbacks and knocking their helmets off. He intentionally went for the head.

After retiring from a Pro-bowl career he was a successful businessman in Memphis but he was still a wild, mean man.

His wife was about to divorce him when someone told her about Jesus. She gave her life to Christ. She gave John a New Testament and said she was leaving him unless he read it. He started reading it, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. When he got to John 3:16 God broke his heart. The word that broke his man old heart was "whoever." He said, "Whoever? That could be me." He knelt down and surrendered his life to Jesus. Since that time he's been sharing his story and it's called "Taming the Bull." A life destined for destruction blindsided by love. God can tame the wildest person.

## CONCLUSION

God loves you so much that He sent His one and only Son to die on a cross for your sins. Once an elderly seminary professor was teaching a class on comparative religions and here's how he described the differences. "It was if I had fallen into a deep, abandoned pit. Mohammed came along and told me that it must have been Allah's will for me to be in the pit, and he left. Then Buddha came by and told me if I would stop desiring to be out of the pit, I would no longer suffer—and he left. Confucius came by and said, "If you trip, you will fall into a pit. Walk carefully." A Hindu teacher came by and told me if I was good in the well, I might be reincarnated out of the well in my next life—and he left. But Jesus came along and saw me in the pit, and He climbed down into the pit and lifted me out of the pit."

There's an old hymn that says, "From sinking sands; He lifted me. With tender hands; He lifted me. From shades of night to plains of light, oh, praise His name, He lifted me!" (Lyrics by Charles Gabriel)

Here's the best news you'll ever hear in your life: God so loved the world (that's you) that He gave His one and only Son (for you) that whoever (that's you) believes in Him, will not perish, but have eternal life.

## OUTLINE

1. GOD'S LOVE IS UNIVERSAL. "For God so loved the world..."
2. GOD'S LOVE IS UNSELFISH. "...that He gave His one and only Son..."
3. GOD'S LOVE IS PERSONAL. "...that whoever believes in him..."
4. GOD'S LOVE IS ETERNAL. "... shall not perish but have eternal life."

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes