

For God So Loved the World

John 3:16

Studies in John #7

I SAID last week that hardly anything describes American evangelicalism more than the phrase “born again.” And no one verse is more popular in our nation than John 3:16: **For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**

But last I checked, these words haven’t been trademarked by non-Reformed evangelicals! One old *Reformed* writer said, “There is no knowledge in the world that gives so much [contentment] as the knowledge of God’s love through Jesus Christ...this sentence ought to be as a precious jewel, which a man daily wears about his neck.”¹

WHAT IS THIS LOVE? For God so *loved* the world

My kids *love* it when I turn on the “oldies” station in the car! The oldies among us might remember: “What the world needs now is love, sweet love...and the world will be a better place, for you and me, just wait and see.” But haven’t you noticed that hardly anyone ever defines love? It’s the same with John 3:16. Everyone quotes it; no one exegetes it! **For God so *loved* the world.** But WHAT IS THIS LOVE?

Scripture speaks of God’s love in several senses. First, there is the love that is natural and internal to the Persons of the Holy Trinity in which they

love one another (*ad intra*). “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and we saw in 1:18 that the Son has eternally been in the bosom of the Father. But this love is not what’s being described here. God’s love here is for **the world** that is external to his and that he voluntarily shows his creatures (*ad extra*). If we’re going to understand John 3:16 we have to know how this voluntary love that God has outside himself for his creatures has several senses.

First, **God has a universal love for all the things he has made.** “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). After describing what the Lord made the psalmist said, “May the LORD rejoice in his works” (Ps. 104:31b). Proverbs 8 describes God accomplishing creation by means of his wisdom, which John 1 says is the Word: “I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man” (vv. 30–31). After saying the Lord “gives food to all flesh” the Psalmist responds, “for his steadfast love [covenant faithfulness] endures forever” (Ps. 136:25). But **for God so loved the world** is speaking of more than love for created things but persons because it was in his love **that the Father gave his only Son** for *whoever believes*.

God has a second and even more particular love: **God has a love for all human beings.** Elihu told Job, “Remember to extol [God’s] work, of which

men have sung. All mankind has looked on it; man beholds it from afar” (vv. 24–25). Then Elihu describes God’s works: rain that he “drop[s] on mankind abundantly” (vv. 27, 28) and food that “he gives...in abundance” (v. 31). Paul and Barnabus told the Lystrans that God “did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17). And didn’t Jesus say we are to love not only our friendly neighbors but also our enemies “so that you may be sons of your Father...[who] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:43–45).

Most specifically is that **God has a special love for his elect people**. “In love [God] predestined us for adoption” (Eph. 1:4–5).² And it would be easy to say here that John is speaking of “the world of the elect” because of this love and because of other “limiting” sounding passages like Jesus coming to save his people (Matt. 1:21). But men like John Calvin and John Davenant remind us that we need to recognize that this secret grace of God for the elect is beyond our comprehension; so leave it for him. What we need to be concerned about is what he’s revealed to us which is his grace in Christ for the world.³ So WHAT LOVE IS THIS in John 3:16? God’s love for all human beings that he has made, who have rebelled against him, and for whom he sent his Son.

THE SOURCE OF THIS LOVE: For *God* so loved the world

Now that we know what this love is we can see THE SOURCE OF THIS LOVE. Remember Nicodemus' confusion about Jesus' teaching on needing to be completely and radically transformed by God to enter the kingdom. Jesus then told him that "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" and here's the purpose: "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (vv. 14, 15). Then comes verse 16 that is intimately with 3:15 by that word **for**. Why is it that all who believe have eternal life? **For** or *because* **God so loved the world** by sending his Son. The source of this sending of the Son so that you would believe in him and be saved is God!

Notice what he *doesn't* say: "For we so loved God that we gave ourselves to him that he sent his Son to give us what we deserved: eternal life" Children, what do you think about that? Does God love us because we first loved him? Did God send his Son in response to our asking him? Are we saved because we deserve it or have been good? Salvation is not like earning an allowance because you've done your chores. Salvation is God giving us what we cannot give ourselves! **God so loved the world!** This is the very heartbeat of God himself, of our faith in Jesus, of the religion called Christianity, and who we are as a Reformed church. Amen? The very blood that runs through our spiritual veins flows from the heart of God in John 3:16.

He left His Father's throne above,
So free, so infinite His grace;
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race;
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me.
Amazing love, how can it be?
That Thou my God should'st die for me!

THE NATURE OF THIS LOVE: For *thus* God loved the world that he gave
God loves. But what is THE NATURE OF THIS LOVE? We hear so much
about love. "Love wins." "Coexist." "Love trumps hate." But what is it about
God's love that makes it so amazing? Why is his love so powerful that it has
changed the world, is changing the world, and will forever change the world?

Our English translations say **for God so loved the world** and the
connotation to us is that John is saying God really, really, really loves the
world. He *so* loves. The opening clause is **for *thus* (*houtos gar*) God loved the
world**. It is stressing the intensity and greatness of God's love but not in a
mushy, feel-good, undefined way.⁴ Look at the rest of the sentence: **for *thus*
God loved the world that he gave his only Son**. The intensity and greatness is
manifested in the self-giving of the eternal Father of his eternal Son to this
temporal world.⁵ How different is God's love than ours? We talk about falling
in and out of love in the same sentence. Our love is selfish. But the love of God
is selfless; it is a giving love. What does it mean that God **gave** his only Son?

Think about the story of Abraham and Isaac. God tells Abraham to give Isaac, his only son, as a sacrifice to God himself (Gen. 22:2, 12). Not only is Isaac Abraham's firstborn son but he is the one through whom God's covenant was to progress. Through Isaac the seed of the woman was to come and crush the seed of the serpent. Through Isaac that all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. Think of the anguish you would undergo if God called you to give up your first and only son. The Father did by giving up his only Son as a sacrifice. "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (15:13). "By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). This love of God should make us immediately think about Christ's love for his church, "g[i]v[ing] himself for her."

THE OBJECT OF THIS LOVE: For God so loved *the world*

God loves in giving his Son. For whom was the Son given? This leads to THE OBJECT OF THIS LOVE: **the world**. This past week TableTalk Magazine published the first of six articles I wrote on what is popularly known as "limited atonement." One person replied like this: "Absolute rubbish. The theory of limited atonement is far from biblical - in fact, Scripture says over and over that Christ died for **all** - for sins of the **whole world**. Please provide

one verse/passage that clearly and directly states that Jesus did not die for **everyone.**” We have to exegete, not assume. What does John mean here?

There are three New Testament words for **world** and John uses the *kosmos* here. And in John’s Gospel he uses it in several senses.⁶ He uses it in a temporal sense of what existed “before the foundation of the world” (John 17:5, 24). He uses it in a physical sense of the created universe including the earth: “the world was made through him” (John 1:10). He uses it in a generic sense of humanity without specific individuals in mind: “Look, the world has gone after him” (John 12:19). Most importantly he uses it in an ethical sense.

- The place of spiritual darkness. Jesus is “the light of the world” who “shines in the darkness” yet the “people [of the world] loved the darkness rather than the light” (John 1:5; 9:5; 3:19; cf. 12:46).
- The place in the grip of demonic powers. Jesus proclaims, “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out” (John 12:31; cf. 14:30; 16:11).
- The place of unbelief. “The world did not know him” (John 1:10). And Jesus prayed to his righteous Father that “the world does not know you” (John 17:25).
- The place of spiritual blindness. “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (John 9:39).
- The place of hatred against God. “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me” (John 7:7). “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18).

So what does this mean? It means that the Father in his love for the human race that he created sent his Son so that if anyone in spiritual blindness, darkness, and unbelief, in the grip of demonic powers, and who hates God may believe and be saved!⁷ “God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big...but because the world is so bad.”⁸ Does God love everyone in the world? Again, yes, in a different sense than just the creation itself and in a different sense than his special elect people.⁹ We can say he loves “all mankind fallen in Adam”¹⁰ and not just the world “then living, but those also which should be upon the earth unto the world’s end.”¹¹ In fact verses 16 and 17 together show this as if his love for the world here in verse 16 meant that everyone was loved in that most unique of senses, then everyone will be saved because verse 17 says he sent his Son not to condemn the world but to save it.

For what are men, that God loves them? What cause has the immortal, to love the poor worms of the earth? The righteous, to love sinners? The Master, the ingrate, the unfaithful servants? ...Ought he not without ceasing, rather to represent unto us the hatred of his just anger of this mighty God...But O divine love: Oh wonderful divinity. Thou has loved the world, without considering any certain world, any Sex or Quality: yea, all the creatures which are come of since Adam and Eve, men and women, great and little, poor and rich, fools & wisemen.¹²

Also, Jesus’ and John’s Bible was the Old Testament. This is so important to keep in mind here. John’s point is not a theory of the extent of Christ’s death, either every single human being or only God’s elect. In the

story of God's dealings with humanity the coming of the Word-made-flesh is the pinnacle. In chapter 1 he is the one who brings fullness of "grace and truth" (1:17), the one all the Law and the prophets spoke of (1:45), and the fulfillment of Jacob's ladder as the only way to the Father (1:51). In chapter 2 he is the one who brings the age of the Spirit symbolized by wine (2:11) and the final temple (2:21). And what did the Old Testament promise about salvation? Was it only for the Jewish people? Or did he promise father Abraham that a day was coming when all the nations would be blessed? In Deuteronomy 7 the Lord says the Jewish people alone were holy, chosen, and a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth for no other reason than he decided to love them in loyalty to his ancient promises (vv. 6–8). In "the fullness of the time" (Gal. 4:4) God sends his Son to make a saving covenant not only with the Israelites but with every people, tribe, tongue, language, and nation (Rev. 5:9). This is exactly what God promised to Abraham in Genesis 22:18: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

THE PURPOSE OF THIS LOVE: *eternal life*

This love of God in giving his Son to this sinful world had a purpose: **that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.** Look at THE PURPOSE OF THIS LOVE in closing. I want you to imagine that everyone in Oceanside has a terminal disease. The President sends the CDC's

best doctor with a cure and publicly announces that all who wanted to be cured can come and receive it. This shows the President's love for the citizens of Oceanside. But being the 21st century, a protest breaks out: "Hey, hey, ho, ho, the Prez's remedy's got to go." Channel 10 news asks why the protest: "We're protesting the President sending one doctor with one cure to one place on one day to be cured." Is this be a valid point? No! Medical assistance was offered to all without condition and without exception!¹³

My friend, you're a part of this world. You're a "whoever." God loves you and has shown that in sending his Son Jesus Christ to this world to live, die, and be raised again as a remedy for your spiritual sickness. He "seriously invite[s you and me] to believe."¹⁴ He "extends [this love] to all men, inasmuch as Jesus Christ reaches out his arms to call and allure all men both great and small, and to win them to him."¹⁵ He "offers his grace to men in common."¹⁶ As "the Heavenly Father [he] loves the human race, and wishes that [you] should not perish."¹⁷ One of the great English Reformation theologians was John Davenant, who said this:

Christ...is here proposed as an universal remedy provided for the whole world...this panacea of the death of Christ is declared applicable for salvation to every man...Shew me an individual of the human race to whom the minister of the Gospel may not truly say; God hath so loved thee, that he gave his only begotten Son, that if thou shouldst believe in him, thou shalt not perish but have everlasting life. This, on the certainty of his believing, might be announced to any individual.¹⁸

Endnotes

¹ Daniel Tossanus, *The Exercise of the faithful soule* (Imprinted at London by Henrie Middleton for Henrie Denham, 1583), 137-141. The original uses “contentation.”

² John Calvin similarly distinguishes three senses but with modification: general love for all humanity, particular love for his people, and sealing love by the Holy Spirit to assure his people. *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Sermon 28 on 4:36–38, p. 167.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on John 3:16*; John Davenant, “A Dissertation on the Death of Christ,” in *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians* (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1832), 521.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 204.

⁵ Chrysostom in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers*, Volume 4, Part 1: St. John (Oxford, John Henry Parker; London, J.G.F. & J. Rivington, 1845), 116.

⁶ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 126–128; .R.A. Muller, “World,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Logos version.

⁷ John Diodati, *Pious and Learned Annotations upon the Holy Bible: Plainly Expounding the most difficult places thereof* (Second edition, London: Printed by Miles Flesher, for Nicolas Fussels, 1648), 83.

⁸ Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 205.

⁹ Ludovigus Crocius cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978), 373.

¹⁰ John Trapp, *A Brief Commentary or Exposition Upon the Gospel According to St John* (London: Printed by G.M. for John Bellamy, and are to be sold in his Shop, at the Signe of the three Golden-Lyons in Cornehill, near the Royal Exchange, 1646), 16.

¹¹ Cited in Augustine Marlorate, *A Catholike and Eccesiastical exposition of the holy Gospek after S. John*, trans. Thomas Timme (Imprinted at London by Thomas Marshe, Anno Domini, 1575), 398. Therefore he loves “all mankind.” Wolfgang Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, trans. John Merton (London: Imprinted by Henry Bynneman, 1578), 962–963.

¹² Tossain, *The Exercise of the faithful soule*, 137–141.

¹³ Adapted from Davenant, “A Dissertation on the Death of Christ,” in *An Exposition*, 343–346.

¹⁴ John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (Published by Simeon Ash, Printed by G. Miller for Edward Brewster on Ludgate hill need Fleet-Bridge at the signe of the Bible, 1645), 209–210.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Sermon 28 on 4:36–38, p. 167.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Sermons on Psalm 119*, Sermon 7 on 119:49–55, p. 134.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on John 3:16*.

¹⁸ Davenant, “A Dissertation on the Death of Christ,” in *An Exposition*, 343–346