

John 3:14-21

Why is John 3:16 So Well Known?

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 – v. 16.

Have you ever seen a Major League Baseball game on TV? Have you ever seen such a game where the camera angle is behind the pitcher so that you're able to see the batter and the catcher squatted down behind the plate and the umpire standing behind the catcher? If you've seen that kind of camera angle then there's a good chance that you've also been able to see some of the fans in the bleachers behind the batter. I don't know how common it is anymore but it use to be fairly common to see someone in the bleachers holding up a placard. I suppose that fan would know that there's no way the camera could miss him from that common camera position that faces the batter and must show some of the fans in the bleachers. All that placard would say is John 3:16. It doesn't even give you the words of Jn. 3:16, it just shows the reference.

I've seen it a number of times and I suppose the person holding up the placard hopes that people in the viewing audience will find a Bible and look up Jn. 3:16 or perhaps he hopes that people in the viewing audience will just think on the words of Jn. 3:16 assuming as he may that everyone knows the words to Jn. 3:16. You could call it, I suppose, a clever way to sow the seeds of the gospel because, like I say, there's no way the camera can steer away from it or block it out.

Let's change sports now for a moment. Have you ever seen a football game in which the player has those black smears right below his eyes? I understand that those black stripes below the eyes serve the purpose of cutting down glare and hence they help enhance the player's vision. And on some occasions you might see etched into those black smear marks the reference Jn. 3:16. Have you ever seen that? I've seen that a few times.

The question that might naturally arise could be – why Jn. 3:16? Why is it that the person holding up that placard at a baseball game or that football player would have that particular Bible reference etched into those black stripes under his eyes? Could it be that there's an awareness that Jn. 3:16 is the most well known verse in the Bible?

I wonder these days just how well known the verse is. I don't know that we've ever been through a time in our nation's history when Bible illiteracy has ever been higher. I may have shared with you that the last time I preached at the Wheeler Mission, I preached a gospel message from Jonah 1. And before I preached I asked for a show of hands as to how many people in that audience which was upwards, I'm thinking, of 200 men, - how many of them knew the story of Jonah? No more than about a half dozen hands were raised. Maybe Jn. 3:16 isn't as well known as it's been in the past.

I have no doubt that if you were to wind the clock back even just a few years you would find this verse very well known. Chances are you'd be able to find a large number of adults who perhaps as children were dropped off by their parents at Sunday School and

once they got a little older they probably wouldn't attend church or Sunday School but in the little bit of instruction they would have received, they would have learned Jn. 3:16. There use to be, you see, a minimum amount of Bible knowledge that permeated our culture and that knowledge would have included such things as the 10 Commandments; the story of David and Goliath; The stories of Noah and Jonah; the 23rd Psalm and Jn. 3:16.

And the fact that Jn. 3:16 would have been included in this minimal amount of Bible knowledge could be a little bit puzzling especially when you consider what we've noted already in our studies of John's gospel that this statement from Christ is not something that's being proclaimed loudly from the rooftops, so to speak, but it's being communicated to Nicodemus in a secret meeting at night. We've considered the likelihood that Nicodemus may well have come to Jesus by night because he was afraid of what his associates might think of him if it became known that a master in Israel had gone to Jesus to sincerely inquire of him.

And so Jn. 3:16 in its original setting does not appear to be something that was intended for wide spread circulation but for a somewhat hushed and secret meeting. So again I raise the question – what is it about this statement by Christ that has made it one of the most well known Bible verses throughout the course of church history? Could it be that the reason the verse has become so well known is that in this verse you have what may very well be the most concise statement in all the Bible that pertains to the gospel? Is this verse a concise yet comprehensive statement of the gospel?

I think the argument could be made for saying that is indeed the case. What I'd like to do this morning is to visit this very familiar verse and try to analyze it in terms of its widespread familiarity throughout history. And the simplest way I know to conduct this analysis is to raise that very question I've already raised a couple of times now. The question goes like this?

Why is Jn. 3:16 So Well Known?

Let's begin by reading the verse again: *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.* Why is this verse so well known? Consider with me first of all that one of the reasons this verse is so well known is:

I. Because It Reveals the Heart of God in His Love

For God so loved the world. We first meet up with the love of God in this verse. The word *love* is the Greek word that has become most associated with Christian love. It's the word *agape*. According to one Greek lexicon this is a term that makes reference to the will rather than to feeling. There's another Greek word that describes love as a feeling. It's the word *phileo*. The name *Philadelphia* is derived from this Greek word. It's for that reason that our city of Philadelphia is sometimes referred to as the city of brotherly love.

Agape, on the other hand does not make reference so much to feeling as to will. And when you think about it God's love would have to be a love based on His will more than His feelings. You see this verse presents to us a very plain setting that provides the backdrop for God's love. That backdrop happens to be man perishing in his sin. *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.*

So the setting for this verse is man in a condition of *perishing*. That same lexicon defines this word *perishing* as *being lost, ruined, or destroyed*. Metaphorically it means *to devote or give over to eternal misery in hell*. This is the part of the verse, no doubt, that many non-Christians find offensive. What do you mean – man perishing in hell? Can that be right? Does that seem fair? And instead of seeing the blessed truth of God's love in Jn. 3:16 they can't beyond the perishing aspect of the verse.

Why are we perishing? Why did God ever allow such a situation that could bring about man perishing? And while you may try to kick against the notion of man perishing, the truth of it and the reality of it is too plain to miss. Isn't it ironic that lost souls can view man as evolving when in fact he's perishing? Why is it that all men die? Why is it that death itself is an inescapable phenomenon that we can't set aside no matter how hard we try?

Just look at what happens as men and women grow older. While they may acquire the wisdom that comes with experience they also undergo the decaying process that comes with age. Their bodies slow down; their internal organs don't function as efficiently and effectively as they did in younger times. They bare all the marks of aging and in spite of our best efforts to ward off all the effects of bodily break downs and mental slowness, these things catch up with us at some point until the soul departs from the body and that body is placed in the ground.

And even that is not the end of perishing. We're told in Heb. 9:27 that *it is appointed unto man once to die but after this the judgment*. And so physical death gives way to spiritual death and to everlasting death. So this is the backdrop to God's love. God has not been indifferent to man's awful plight even though it was a condition that man brought upon himself. It was sin against God, you see, that brought about death. It was high-handed rebellion about which man was warned ahead of time that brought about sin and misery.

And yet in spite of such sin and high-handed rebellion, our text tells us that *God so loved the world*. He would have been perfectly just to condemn the world but instead He loved the world. Now let me say at this point under this heading of the heart of God that there are many things that can be emphasized about God. And it seems that in different Christian circles and in various churches or denominations there are various characteristics about God that seem to be emphasized.

You may, for example, see an emphasis placed on the holiness of God. I think there are some churches or denominations or Christian schools and universities that have felt that

the doctrine of God's love has been so abused that they've felt the need to counter that abuse with an emphasis on God's holiness. And in close connection with such an emphasis you might hear a lot about the majestic splendor of God as well as the law of God. Isn't the God of the New Testament the same God that in the Old Testament descended upon Mt. Sinai and accompanied His presence with thunder and lightning and the quaking of that mount along with an ear splitting sound of a trumpet which was followed by the giving of the 10 commandments?

God, you see, is holy and He's all powerful and He reigns supreme and is the judge of all mankind. And there's no denying that such revelations are true. Neither is there any denying that the God with whom we have to do is far above and beyond us. We don't understand His ways and there are times when we in our folly try to take issue with Him the way Job did. The words of Isa. 55:8,9 come readily to mind: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

There are those that claim that God is so far above and beyond us that He's unknowable. The gulf between us is just too great for us to know anything about God. This is really just a liberal theological notion that makes it easy to excuse oneself from even trying to know God. We should simply go on with whatever lifestyle we choose because we don't know and we can't know what God condemns or commends.

Such a notion might be correct were it not for the fact that God has chosen to reveal Himself through His Word. And it's His Word, therefore, that must shape the way we think of God and the way God would have us think upon Him is with a very strong emphasis on the gracious and glorious truth that He so loved the world.

While God is seen in all His glorious attributes, I don't know of any attribute that comes as close to defining God as His love. The Apostle John knew this perhaps better than anyone and so we read in 1Jn. 4:8 *He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.* And again a few verses later in v. 16 *And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.*

This is how God chooses to be known, as the God of love. And however mysterious God becomes in His transcendence He truly does condescend to our level of understanding when He reveals Himself as a God of love. 1Jn. 4 is perhaps the best commentary you can read on Jn. 3:16. *God is love* verse 8 tells us, and then we go on to read the commentary, as it were in vv. 9,10 *In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.* And then there comes the practical application of God's love:

Verses 11,12 *Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. 12 No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us....vv. 15,16 Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God*

dwelleth in him, and he in God. 16 And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.

So our knowledge of God must begin with knowing the heart of God. And the heart of God becomes very evident in the words of our text *For God so loved the world*. But not only does this verse set before us the heart of God, but we see next that this verse is so well known:

II. Because it Reveals the Mind of God in His Plan

Spurgeon makes the remark of just how much is packed into that little word *so* – *For God so loved the world*. *Never has so much meaning been compressed into so small a space as in that famous little word “So,” in the text*, he writes.

In that little word *so* you have the plan of the ages. You have the plan that goes all the way back to the garden of Eden. Indeed you have the plan that predates time itself. In that word you have the mind of God which shows you the outworking of what was in His heart. *For God so loved the world*; i.e. This is the manner in which God loved the world.

And in the words that follow you see the design of the plan, or what the plan was designed to accomplish. In a word, the plan was designed to accomplish salvation. Verse 17 makes this clear – *For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved*. And what this verse enables you to see is that the connection is very close between salvation and life. In v. 16 the plan is that believers might have everlasting life. In v. 17 the plan is that believers might be saved. To be saved, then, means to gain life. You could say that it's a plan to regain what man once had but what he lost in the fall. He had life; he had the potential for gaining eternal life; instead he chose death and gained physical death and spiritual death and everlasting death.

But in His infinite grace and wisdom, God had the remedy already in hand. This is why Christ is called in Rev. 13:8 *The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*. Man's fall into sin, you see, didn't catch God by surprise. He saw it coming. Indeed a part of His plan was to manifest the glory of His grace by allowing man's fall to come. We begin now to plumb one of the deep mysteries of God's plan. Did He force the issue? Did He positively ordain man to fall so He might magnify His grace in His plan of redemption?

We have to be very careful when it comes to attempting to answer such a question. And we have to be sure that we're governed by Scripture and not simply by logic. Logically you might make the case that says man was ordained to sin. But then you have to take James 1:13 into account: *Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man*. God does not force man to sin. God Himself is not the author of sin. James goes on to explain *But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death*.

In the plan of redemption God saw sin coming but He saw it coming in such a way that left the blame with man and not with God. And in seeing it coming, He had a plan of love

already in place. He would love the world in this way – He would give His Son. *For God so (in this manner) loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.* We read those words so easily and I'm afraid that the down side to having a verse become so well known as this verse is well known is that we become so familiar with what it says that we hardly take the time to consider what it means and especially what it means in terms of God's love.

Here, then, is God's love – that He gave as it were His most precious possession – He gave His Son, His only begotten Son. Some versions translate it *His only Son* or *His one and only Son*. I think these translations are inferior to our Authorized Version for reasons I won't go into at this time. But I will say this about these modern translations. They certainly capture the truth that Christ was and is unique. There's not another like Him. Dr. Cairns use to tell us that when God gave His only begotten Son, He gave the very richest treasure that heaven possessed.

And so you begin to see something of the mind of God in His plan for the ages. What John adds in his first epistle in which he describes love is found in 1Jn. 4:10 *Herein is love*, he writes. So in the words that follow we're going to learn what may be described as the very essence of God's love: *not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

That word *propitiation* bring to our attention the aim behind God giving His Son, or God sending His Son. We usually think of that word in terms of God's justice but here John is showing us its connection to God's love. God so loved the world, we can say, that He gave His only begotten Son to be the propitiation for our sins. In other words He gave His Son to bear God's wrath – that's the meaning of propitiation. It wasn't enough, you see, for Christ to simply come into this world and take to Himself our flesh. Oh that is great condescension indeed. But in order for the plan of salvation to be executed, Christ must bear the punishment that we deserve. He must bear, therefore, the righteous punishment that justice demanded so that justice might be satisfied.

Herein lies the genius of the gospel, that God might be just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). And so you begin to see the greatness of God's plan and how His love is manifested in the execution of that plan. The aim behind the plan is salvation. And not only do you see the substance of that plan but you also see the high price for such a plan. In order for this plan to be carried out God must give His only begotten Son. He must give the One that was most precious to Him to be the propitiation for our sins. He must execute His plan this way so that love may be compatible with justice.

The Psalmist saw this when he wrote in Ps. 85:10 *Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.* I don't know of any other verse in the Psalms that so points us to the cross of Christ. It was there at the cross that mercy and truth met. It was there that righteousness and peace kissed each other. So it was there that love and justice came together so that God could manifest His love and satisfy His justice.

So we see the design of the plan – salvation; and we see the cost of the plan – it would cost God His only begotten Son. We can't leave this point without at least a word about the scope of the plan. This plan of salvation, you see, would be world-wide in its scope. *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.*

There is, of course, a great deal of controversy and debate about the use of the term *world*. Does this mean that God loved every single person in the world? Or does it simply mean that salvation would bring into its fold people of various kinds throughout the world? I believe the answer is yes and yes. You certainly find a good description of the use of this term in Rev. 5:9,10: *And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.*

Here is what must ultimately be the meaning of the term *world* for here are the ones that are actually redeemed. But does this mean that God does not take any interest in those that are not elected to salvation? Did He create them in order to damn them? I use to think that probing into such questions amounted to so much theological speculation and hairsplitting. With the passing of time, however, I've come to realize that it actually is a very important question, especially when you think of the impact it will have on your burden for lost souls.

If God has no burden for the lost, then should He expect you and me to have a burden for the lost? If God created them because He needed in His plan people to populate hell then is it becoming to you and me to weep over souls the way Christ wept over Jerusalem? And what about Christ weeping over Jerusalem? Why would He weep over those that fulfilled His purpose of damnation? Why would He feel for those who only deserved His righteous anger?

I like to quote Calvin's remarks on Lk. 19:44 when it comes to this kind of issue. There are those, you see, that believe very strongly that Christ has no interest in the non-elect except to damn their souls in accordance with His justice. And for you to believe otherwise means that you're compromising your Calvinism and borrowing from Arminianism. Listen to what Calvin says with regard to Christ weeping over Jerusalem:

As there was nothing which Christ more ardently desired than to execute the office which the Father had committed to him, and as he knew that the end of his calling was to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he wished that his coming might bring salvation to all. This was the reason why he was moved with compassion, and wept over the approaching destruction of the city of Jerusalem. For while he reflected that this was the sacred abode which God had chosen, in which the covenant of eternal salvation should dwell – the sanctuary from which salvation would go forth to the whole world, it was impossible that he should not deeply deplore its ruin. And when he saw the people, who had been adopted to the hope of eternal life, perish miserably through their ingratitude and wickedness, we need not wonder if he could not refrain from tears.

When I read quotes like this and then I remember the Apostle Paul whose burden for his kinsmen was so strong that he could wish himself accursed if it would bring salvation to them – then I conclude that my Calvinism is not threatened by the notion that God does indeed have a love for the world that extends to all. He takes no delight in sinners perishing and if you counter these truths by asking the question as to why God did not, then, elect them – the only Scriptural answer, I feel, is to say *that's none of your business*.

The words of Deut. 29:29 apply here: *The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever*. And what is revealed is that Christ was moved very deeply over the plight of Jerusalem; and that Christ loved the rich young ruler even though that rich young ruler went away rejecting Christ; And that Paul could wish himself to be accursed for his kinsmen after the flesh if they might gain salvation. And therefore, you and I should carry the same kind of burden for lost and dying souls and should manifest love to them by telling them of Christ's love for the world.

Why, then, is John 3:16 so well known? It's well known because it reveals the heart of God in His love and it's well known because it reveals the mind of God in His plan of salvation. Let's note finally and briefly that John 3:16 is so well known:

III. Because it Reveals what must be the Response of Man in Faith

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

The response to God's love and God's plan is clearly shown here to the response of faith. Remember that this is John's aim in writing this gospel. By now I hope you can quote Jn. 20:31 *But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name*.

Do you not find Jn. 3:16 presenting a very compelling case to believe the gospel? Here is man perishing in his sin. But here is God sending His Son. Here is man spiritually dead and on his way to eternal death but here is God executing the plan by which sinful and perishing man might be saved and live and live forever. And you see the heart of God in the giving of His Son. And you see the heart of Christ in giving Himself to be your substitute. Do you not find such a plan that meets you where you are and shows you the high price God was willing to pay for you – do you not find such a plan compelling?

Oh how you need to believe in God's Son, not with a superficial kind of belief that merely gives assent to Christ, that's the kind of faith we saw at the end of chp. 2 – that's the kind of faith that Christ would not commit Himself to. But you need to believe with the kind of faith that does what doubting Thomas would later do – a faith that compels you to bow before Jesus and proclaim *He is my Lord and my God*. This is the kind of faith that truly sees where you were headed and what God has done to rescue you from that destiny. This is the kind of faith that brings forth a life that's lived in humble gratitude and praise. How I pray today that you'll find Jn. 3:16 to be so compelling that you will indeed believe.