

## John 3:16 (John 3:9–21)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (June 6, 2021)

### Introduction

John 3:16 has been called the “gospel in a nutshell” and has been the text of countless sermons on God’s great love. Sadly, the verse is taken out of its context to support the view that God loves every person in the whole world and that He is longing for every sinner to come to salvation. As one evangelist stated, “The loving heart of God longs to see all people saved.” Does this verse support that view, a view that actually reduces God’s great redemptive love to an anemic sort of affection easily frustrated since most people reject His love?

This whole section of John’s *Book of Signs* (chapters 2–12) is a discussion of *believing* (2:22–24), identifying believers and unbelievers. Nicodemus is used to illustrate the point that some “believe” in Jesus when they see the signs that He does, but that does not obligate God to save them. Actually, believing saves no one; God saves through a work of sovereign grace. Believing identifies those whom God saves.

For anyone to have saving faith, he must experience *regeneration*—*born again* or better, *born from above*. This new birth is a work of God’s breathing new life into a spiritually dead sinner, which *enables* him to believe in Christ. John 3:16 explains *how* God grants eternal life to believers.

### I. Does God Love Everybody?

1. John 3:16 does not invite anyone to salvation.

The text simply states that God loved something identified as *the world* in a way that required His giving Jesus to be lifted up as a sacrifice (v. 14). This sacrifice enabled God to give eternal life to believers. The verse begins with “*for*” or *because* to explain this process.

The gospel offers salvation to all who will believe in Jesus—the free offer of the gospel. Christians are to obey Christ who commanded His church, “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature*” (Mark 16:15).

2. John 3:16 does not teach that God’s redemptive love is bestowed on everyone who ever lived.

Those who would teach that God loves everyone and gave His son to die for them must answer basic problems:

- 1) They must explain why God said that He loved Jacob and hated Esau (Romans 9:11–13, citing Malachi 1:2, 3).
- 2) They must explain what love means and how a great and sovereign God could be frustrated in His loving, as many teach.
- 3) They must prove that “*whosoever*” means “*whoever will*” and why that would require Christ’s atonement to be *universal* (Christ died for everyone).

3. A bit of language study is necessary to understand the verse.

The word translated *so* is *houto* in the Greek, an adverb meaning, *thus* or “*on this wise*.” In the Greek text, “*so*” stands at the head of the sentence, reflecting its importance in the sentence, which answers to “*as*” in verse 14. Had John intended to describe *how much* God loved, he would have used the word *tosoutos*, “*so great*” or “*so much*” (Matthew 8:10; 15:33).

4. Who really limits the atonement?

Sovereign grace teaches that Christ's death saves all for whom it was intended. Those who teach that Christ died for everyone diminish the worth of Christ's sacrifice. According to them, it is insufficient to save anyone unless the sinner provides the key operative, *faith*. This view flatters impenitent sinners by assuring them that it is in their power to repent and believe.

Since it is the basic conviction of all religion that man is in the hand of God, this view undermines this fact. It begets preaching that generates no fear of God and produces converts with little or no humility and reverence for God due to their self-confidence.

## II. Worlds in Opposition

1. The *world* that God loved cannot not include the whole human race since Scripture clearly reveals another *world* that the Father does not love.

Certainly, God would not command believers *not* to love the world He loves and for which He sacrificed His own Son (1 John 2:15).

It cannot be the world for which Jesus refused to pray (John 17:9). Note the clear distinction between two things — (1) the world and (2) those given to Jesus by God.

1 John 3:1 reveals that there is a love the Father shows to some (believers) whom the world does not know because it does not know the Father.

James warns, "*Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4). If believers befriend the world that God "so loved," how could He count them His enemies?

2. Scripture limits the *world* (*cosmos*) to *particular* groups.

In Luke 2:, *world* is used to represent the Roman Empire. Obviously, no one outside the governing arm of Rome would enroll himself for the purpose of paying taxes to Rome.

Paul used *world* to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles (Romans 11:12). *World*, in this context, does not include Israel.

Paul commended the church in Rome for their faith, which was known throughout the Roman Empire (Romans 8:1). In this context, *world* is, doubtless, limited to Christian communities.

## Conclusion

The "*world*" of John 3:16 is *representative universalism*. This makes the best sense for 3 reasons:

- 1) There is no offer of the gospel in the verse. This verse states only that God loved the world by giving His Son for it so that all who believe in Him should not perish.

- 2) *Redemptive love* is love of *purpose* that, in God's case, infallibly secures a result on the ones He loves. God gave His Son to secure the actual salvation of His loved ones, not just the possibility of their salvation.

- 3) Jesus was sent to by the Father to provide salvation from sin for more than just believing Jews. Even though salvation was "*of the Jews*" (John 4:22), it was not exclusively for the Jews, as John points out in his gospel. Therefore, John says, "*God loved the world*"—his *elect* (both Jew and Gentile) but not everyone in human race.

The fundamental principle here is that God's love secures the salvation of His own (John 13:1).