

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: A Few Thoughts on John 3:16

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by David Schrock

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

– John 3:16 –

John 3:16 is a wonderful and familiar verse.

It is *wonderful*, as it encapsulates the gospel in a single verse. Impelled by love, God sent his son to die in the place of sinners, so that in the resurrection, those who believe on him will be saved. And it is *familiar*, as John 3:16 shows up on road signs and at football games all over America. Although sign-holders standing in end zones are not as prevalent as they used to be.

However you have learned (or not learned) John 3:16, it is one of the most important verses in the Bible. But what does it mean?

A few years ago, I did a word-by-word study of John 3:16, meditating on what each turn of phrase means in the verse. Today, I want to answer a few questions about the verse as we prepare to consider John 3:1–21 this weekend.

What does “God so loved the world” mean?

While many have taken John 3:16 to mean, “God loves the world so, so, so much,” the word “so” is better understood as a statement of manner, not degree. John 3:16 focuses on the way that God loves us: *He loves us in this way, namely he gave his Son for us.*

The same idea is found in 1 John 3:1, where the apostle says, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” God’s love is manifested towards the world by sending his Son to die in our place, and by bringing us into his family. This is a glorious reality – that we who deserve everlasting death are brought into the same relationship as Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Son of God by nature and obedience (i.e., the only-begotten Son); we are sons of God by grace and adoption. But the love that he has for you is the same that he has for his Son. This should amaze us, especially because we are a part of a world that stands against him.

Who is the world?

Though it is debated, the world is probably the undifferentiated mass of humanity who stand against God in creation. In John's day, the world would be contrasted with the Jews, i.e., the Gentiles who stand outside of Israel. In John 3, Jesus is redrawing the boundaries of his covenant people, however. No longer will the kingdom of God be composed of Jews—a belief Nicodemus would have held. In Christ, the kingdom of God would be composed of those born again by the Spirit, whether from Israel or not.

Throughout John 1–4, Jesus is widening his message of salvation to people from Israel and the nations. Interestingly, these chapters begin and end outside of Jerusalem and are composed of Jews and Samaritans. And these chapters traverse through lands (Galilee in particular) filled with Gentiles. In this way, John 3:16 is continuing to say that Jesus came not for Jews only. Rather, he is the lamb of God who would be sacrificed for the world (John 1:29)—Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles.

What is the world?

To further our understanding of God's love for the world, it's important to see that God loves a world filled with sinners. In other words, God does not love the world in its pristine, created state or its final, recreated state. Rather, John 3:16 beholds a world at war against God. And in response to men who have rebelled against him, his love moves him to bring salvation.

In this way, we might say, "God loved the *sinful* world"—not for its sin, but for the sake of his Son. God loved the world, because from the world he would save a people for himself—the people who he promised the Son before the world began (read John 17). At the same time, God's love in John's Gospel is often connected with this glory (see John 11:1–6), and thus God's love for the world is meant to reveal his glory, especially the glory of the Son who would die in the place of his people.

What does God give?

Motivated by love—for his glory and for his world—God gave his Son. He gave for no other reason than his own love. And he gave in such a way that all the world learns that God is good and true, merciful and mighty. He gave his Son, and John 3:16 read in the whole Gospel indicates that this gift leads to the cross.

God's gift of the Son is not just seen in his incarnation. God gave his Son the work of dying for the world. And in this way, God's gift becomes the standard of every other gift. To know his gift is to know true love, and to receive this gift is to know eternal life. And incredibly this work of God does not just make salvation possible; it secures salvation for all whom the Father gave to the Son (see John 17).

Will God's love save?

Salvation belongs to the Lord (Jon. 2:9). And this salvation is not just offered, but accomplished. Too many times, John 3:16 is presented as a gospel invitation which hearers may accept or reject—it all depends on them.

While it is true that the gospel is presented and received or rejected, this gospel offer does not define the nature of God's salvation. Rather, as we read John 3:16 in the context of John's Gospel, we see that by sending God the Son, and later God the Spirit, God the Father ensures that salvation will be accomplished.

Jesus's death will save all those for whom he dies. As John 10:11–14 will put it, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep—those in Israel and those in other folds (nations) who will be gathered into Jesus's eternal flock. Such salvation is not received by all who hear of it, but as Jesus will say in John 8:47, "Whoever is of God hears the words of God." Salvation is not something God attempts for the world, and only gets 50% (or less). God is perfect in his power and application of salvation.

In other words, hearing and believing are the gifts God gives to the children that he is bringing to life by the Spirit (see John 1:1–12; 3:3–8). And John 3:16 is the explanation of how God the Father, through Jesus's "gift," will save his people, those "who will believe the words of Christ."

In this verse, "whoever" indicates that the offer is given to all people everywhere. It is not just given to the Jews; it is given to everyone—you, me, the whole world. But the whoever does not mean that God leaves it up to chance for who will believe. In many other places in John's Gospel, we see how God gives faith, and thus in his universal offer of salvation, we see how God brings his message of eternal life to the sheep who hear Jesus's voice (see John 10:26–30).

In the context of John 3, verse 16 explains what Jesus just said to Nicodemus about the new birth. Thus, we need to see that John 3:16 is also about the new birth. Jesus is God's gift to enlarge his family, the family that could only exist if Jesus died for them. At the same time, the Spirit is the one who raises the dead to life, but only because Jesus died and rose again.

All in all, John 3:16 is a glorious verse that encapsulates so much of the gospel. Still, it is also a verse that must be read carefully. Because it has been so popularized, it can at times mislead its loudest proponents. We should shout this wonderful truth as loud as possible; we should declare to everyone we can; but we must also remember that salvation belongs to the triune God and he will not fail in bringing his people to himself.

This is the foundation on which the good news of John 3:16 stands. And we should not deny the sovereignty of God in salvation in order to force on people their responsibility to believe. Both of those realities are true and in John 3:16, we see the wonderful promise that all who believe by the Spirit will be received, because of the Son, given by the Father.

Soli Deo Gloria,

Pastor David