

John 3:16

A Bible Study with Mike Powers

INTRODUCTION

John 3:16 is probably the most familiar verse in the entire Bible even to the secular world.

1. “Wow!”—TV commercial during 2014 AFC Championship football game
2. Tim Tebow—eye black during 2010 playoff game; 94 million searches
3. “The Rainbow Man”—Frederick Rollen Stewart
4. “Cleopatra’s Needle”—London, England

John 3:16 is familiar to many, but it may have lost some of its “Wow!” That can happen when something is so common to us; we take it for granted. The season of Lent begins on the church calendar tomorrow. It is the 40 days, excluding the Sundays, before Easter Sunday. In those 40 days, we celebrate the passion, death, and burial of Jesus, and then on Easter Sunday, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. This is a perfect time to look at this wonderful verse, particularly because:

1. **Not everyone** knows John 3:16.
2. John 3:16 is at the **heart** of what we Christians believe.
3. John 3:16 is **succinct** (24 words, 19 of which are monosyllabic).
4. John 3:16 is rich in truth yet **uncomplicated**.
5. Most importantly: John 3:16 tells the message **everyone needs to hear**.

REVIEW OF CONTEXT OF JOHN 3:16

John 3 explains how Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus by night and told him that he knew that Jesus had come from God as a teacher. Jesus spoke those famous, yet obviously very troubling, words to Nick that night:

You must be born again! Without a work of the Spirit you can't even see the Kingdom, much less enter in. John 3:1-8	Why can't you believe this? Religious activity is only behavior modification. Look and Live! John 3:9-15	The Son of God has come as light in a world of darkness. You will be saved or condemned depending on how you respond. John 3:16-21
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- 1) “For God so loved the world....”
 - a) God so loved the world not because one of God’s attributes is to be loving, but because **God is love**; God’s character is love—perfect, complete, holy love. All that we define as love is not God, but God is the very essence of love.
 - b) The Greek word *houtos* is the **first** word in John 3:16. This is the emphatic position, pointing forward to the rest of the sentence. So, the verse literally reads: “**In this way God loved the world...**” The emphasis is on the purpose and intensity of God’s love for us, a clearer picture of God’s nature, character—who God is. And this is not

merely a matter of grammar. It is the consistent emphasis of God's love revealed throughout the New Testament:

- Paul writes that “neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39 NKJV).
- Paul prays they will comprehend “what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...” (Eph 3:18–19 ESV).
- “See **what great** love the Father has lavished on us...” (I Jn 3:1 NIV).

In C. S. Lewis's fictitious book, *Screwtape Letters*, the demon Screwtape tells his “apprentice” demon Wormwood, “One must face the fact that all the talk about His [God's] love for men... is not [as one would gladly believe] mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does...”! God really does love the world. All 7,601,543,877 of us (as of this morning). That is who God is, and that is what God does.

2) “...that He gave his only Son...”

- a) Rephrase that familiar phrase this way: **God's love sent Jesus**. In I John 4:7–21, the word “love” (*agape*) is found 27 times—in 15 verses. Nineteen of those references are in relation to God's love for us; eight pertain to our love for one another. Thus, the emphasis is for the reader to grasp that the essence of God's character/being is self-giving love.
- b) I John 4:9—“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”
 - i) That word *manifest* is also translated **showed**. It means the disclosure of something that was previously hidden. Not only are we loved by God, but in Jesus we have looked into the very heart of God. The love of God has been completely, fully displayed on the world stage. God's passion, God's character, God's personhood—who God truly is—has been lived among us in the person of Jesus Christ.
 - ii) God's *only* Son—the *monogenes*—the only begotten, the incomparable One, the unique One who loves and is loved by the Father, the One who shares eternal love with the Father and the Spirit before the foundation of the world, the perfect fellowship, the divine life of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There must be two persons for love to exist, the lover and the loved. So, to know God is to know love as **self-giving love, others-oriented love**, love that is determined not by the object that is loveable, but by the subject who is love.

The poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in her love poems to Robert Browning, wanted him to love her, not because of any specific quality in her, which could change, but just from true love alone, which would never change or alter.

*If thou must love me, let it be for naught
Except for love's sake only. Do not say*

*“I love her for her smile—her look—her way
Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day”—
For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
Be changed, or change for thee—and love, so wrought,
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity’s wiping my cheeks dry:
A creature might forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
But love me for love’s sake, that evermore
Thou mayst love on, through love’s eternity.*

- “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8 NKJV).
- “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:31–32).

3) “...that whosoever believes in Him...”

- a) **The Message:** “And the Word became flesh and dwelt [lived/tabernacle] among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). John Wesley referred to the incarnation as the Word’s “most amazing condescension.” God is very intent on communicating with us about himself. This message (the eternal Word) is accessible, understandable, and incomparable.
- b) **The Invitation:** *Whosoever*. Anyone. Everyone. No exceptions or exclusions. Up close and personal. “Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*).
- c) **The Response:** *Believes in him*. This is not easy believe-ism: “just have faith,” or “just believe.” True faith requires an object on which one relies/trusts/leans. Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the most popular preachers and a leading liberal theologian of the first half of the twentieth century, offered a classic definition of faith: “Faith is holding reasonable convictions in realms that reach beyond final demonstration and the thrusting out of one’s life upon those convictions as though they were true.”

“Faith is a verb” (Stan Key). At the heart of John 3:16 is the present tense verb: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes [i.e., is believing, trusting, leaning in him, right now]...”

4) “...should not perish...”

- a) One of the most horrific, yet extremely popular, shows on television is **The Walking Dead**. The plot revolves around a former sheriff’s deputy who, awakening from a

coma several months after being shot on duty, discovers that the world has been ravished by a zombie epidemic of apocalyptic proportions. It seems that he is the only person still alive. After returning home to discover his wife and son missing, he heads for Atlanta to search for his family. Narrowly escaping death at the hands of the zombies, he is aided by another survivor, who takes him to a camp outside the town. There the deputy finds his wife and his son along with his partner/best friend and a small group of survivors who struggle to fend off the zombie hordes as well as to compete with other surviving groups who are prepared to do whatever it takes to survive in this harsh new world.

- b) Ephesians 2:1–3, “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (NKJV). All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. Notice how Paul describes the spiritually “walking dead”:
- i) Those walking according to **the course of this world** (the present world order/mindset/culture); those who are careless of the things of God (opposite of faith is not doubt but *apathy*)
 - ii) Those walking **under the spiritual control** of the “prince of the power of the air,” Satan
 - iii) Those walking **as children of wrath**—with no heart, no passion, no life, no love of God and the things God loves.

Get the picture? Paul is describing the spiritually walking dead, and it is a horrific picture.

- c) C.S. Lewis describe **pride** as human sin Number One, a “cancer that eats up the very possibility of love, or even common sense.” Since the time of the Garden itself, a destructive virus has been loosed in all creation that has within it the power to pervert and destroy everything God has made and to separate the creatures he loves from himself. By rejecting God and his ways and choosing our own paths, we alienate ourselves from Love itself, the goodness which we crave, and the possibility of loving relationships. In other words, apart from God we **perish**.
- John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish...” (NIV). We should not be among the walking dead.
 - Romans 5:15, “For if the many died by the trespass of the one man [Adam], how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!” (NIV).
 - Romans 5:6, 8, “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ...But God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (NIV).

- 5) "...but have everlasting life."
- a) In 1 Corinthians, after addressing various issues and trouble spots in the church, the apostle Paul returned to the gospel, the heart of his ministry, "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved..." (1 Cor 15:1-2a).
 - b) The message (the gospel) was **THE priority** of Paul's preaching and teaching ministry. "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance" (1 Cor 15:3a). He then describes the gospel:
 - i) **Christ died for our sins** according to the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:3b), i.e., "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." or, as noted before, "God loved the world in this manner: he gave his Son...."
 - ii) **(Christ) rose again the third day** in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:4).
 - iii) **All who trust in Christ are going to live forever.** "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:20-22).
 - c) The certainty of the resurrection of Jesus (**the Great Absence**) guarantees the believer's resurrection and the ultimate triumph of God's Forever Kingdom (**the Great Presence**). An agnostic by the name of Adolf Harnack said, "Where you stand with regard to the fact of the Resurrection is, in my eyes, no longer Christian theology. To me Christianity stands or falls with the Resurrection." Believers are going to live forever.

John 3:16 is the gospel in 24 words: "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 so Loved the World

By Frances Townsend

CHORUS

*For God so loved the world,
He gave his only Son,
To die on Calvary's tree,
from sin to set me free.
Someday he's coming back,
What glory that will be!
Wonderful His love to me!*