

For God So Loved

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[0:00] With this being the last time we meet before Thanksgiving, I wanted to focus a little bit! about what the Bible says on Thanksgiving. You know the Bible has numerous verses about Thanksgiving,¹ and it's not talking about the holiday with the turkey and the big balloons, it's actually talking about the attitude that we should have. So here are just a few verses that mention Thanksgiving.

Psalms 106.1 says, Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever. And then Paul references Thanksgiving several times in his letters. 1 Thessalonians 5.18 is one of those references. That verse says, In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. And listen to Ephesians 5.20. That verse says, Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. So 1 Thessalonians 5.18 and Ephesians 5.20 tell us the things for which we should be thankful. And did you hear those references in there? 1 Thessalonians says, In everything. And Ephesians 5.20 says, For all things. So the obvious question then is, How can we really be thankful in everything and for all things? So tonight we're going to go back to a foundational verse to answer that question. And it's a verse that most of us probably have memorized. You know from the handout that the verse is John 3.16. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. So John 3.16 is so familiar that we can sometimes overlook the significance of it.

I just read the verse from the New King James Version, and that version has a single sentence with just 25 words. But that single sentence summarizes the entire gospel. And when we truly understand the significance of the gospel, we'll really be able to understand why we can always be thankful.

We'll look at John 3.16 phrase by phrase tonight. And as we look at each phrase, we're going to explore how the Bible supports itself. So we'll check out several cross-references from both the Old and the New Testaments as we go along. And you'll see that those handouts, or you'll see from your handout as you look at those cross-references, that those cross-references are completely consistent with the message of John 3.16. I've listed every cross-reference on your handout, so if you don't want to follow along when we flip to them, you'll at least have them there to refer to later if you want to. So when we look at just one verse, we have to be careful to avoid taking the verse out of context.

So we'll take just a minute here to set the context of John 3.16. The opening verses of John 3.16 actually document a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. So listen to John 3.1-3.

[3:23] It says, There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. Jesus answered and said to him, Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus then goes on to ask Jesus what it means to be born again. And then Jesus' answer to Nicodemus includes John 3.16.

So we're going to divide John 3.16 into five sections. The first one will be the source. Then we'll look at the motivation. We'll look at the action, the response, and then the results.

So let's first look at the source. And that source is God. That's your first blank on the handout. The source is God. I think you'll find as we go along that the handout may be one of the easiest handouts I've ever given to you.

I'll make sure you have plenty of time to fill that out as well. But when you think about it, how fitting is it that John 3.16 begins with God? Because that beginning of the verse reminds us that God is the source for all things.

So as we start digging into John 3.16, let's review how the Bible describes God. Then we'll go to Acts 17 first. In Acts 17, Paul describes God to the Athenians.

[4:57] In Acts 17, verses 22 through 28 say, Then Paul stood in the midst of the Aragogopolis and said, Now, I see that in all things you are very religious.

For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription, To the unknown God. Therefore, the one whom you worship without knowing, him I proclaim to you.

God, who made the world and everything in it, since he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor is he worshipped with men's hands as if he needed anything, since he gives to all life, breath, and all things.

And he has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord in the hope that they might grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

For in him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, for we also are his offspring. So some of the key things to note about that passage there is at the very beginning, in verse 24 or so, it says, God is the one who made the world and everything in it.

[6:17] So you see he's the source for everything in the world as well. And then if you look at the very end of that, in verse 28, it says, For in him we live and move and have our being.

So it reminds us that we are part of everything in the world, and that our being is dependent upon God as well. So these verses show us that God is more than just the beginning of John 3.16.

He is the beginning of all things, like what we said. So now let's go back to the Old Testament, and look at how God describes himself. This is Exodus 34, 6, and 7.

So in Exodus 34, 6, and 7, it's when Moses and God are interacting there. And verse 6 says, And the Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

So as we move through John 3.16 tonight, we'll notice that John 3.16 simply restates in the New Testament what God just revealed in the Old Testament there.

[7:41] We'll see that God is merciful and gracious, that he's long-suffering and abounding in goodness and truth, and that he does keep mercy for thousands, he does forgive iniquity, transgression and sin, and also, he by no means clears the guilty.

So we'll see all of that as we go through John 3.16. So that covers the source, and of course the source is God. Let's look at the motivation.

Let's talk about God's motivation for John 3.16, and the motivation is that he so loved the world. God so loved the world. We really need to sit here and think about that for a second, because we really have to take some time to let the significance sink in.

So let's talk about how God loved first. In the original Greek, the word translated as so loved is agapao, and when used about people like it is here, the word means to welcome, to entertain, to be fond of, or to love dearly.

So again, that definition is to welcome, to entertain, to be fond of, or to love dearly. And obviously, love dearly is the sense of the word here.

[9:02] That's why most English translations say so loved when they talk about the translation of this verse. And we need to be careful to avoid skipping over the word so, because that two-letter word helps intensify the meaning of that love.

So we know then how God loved. He so loved the world. Now let's talk about who God loved. And whom does the verse say that God loved?

Right? God so loved the world. And remember the context that we just looked at a few minutes ago. Jesus has been explaining to Nicodemus, who's a ruler of the Pharisees, about the need to be born again.

And did the Pharisees believe that God loved the world? He loved the Jews? Yeah. The Pharisees pretty much believed that God so loved the Pharisees, right?

And all the things that the Pharisees did in their mind to honor God. And of course, you could get them to admit that they might have loved the other Jews as well.

[10:09] But trying to go beyond Israel was a tough thing for them, because Jews in general, and particularly the Pharisees, believe that God loved only Israel.

So why is it significant to us that God loves more than just the Jews? Exactly. Most, if not all of us, are not Jews.

So if the verse had said, for God so loved the Jews, the rest of the verse might make for interesting reading, but it really wouldn't be pertinent to us. But because it says, God so loved the world, then we know that the verse does pertain to us.

So we've looked at the source, which of course is God, and we've looked at the motivation, that God so loved the world, and now we need to move on and look at the action that God did, because that motivation did lead to action, and God's action was that He gave His only begotten Son.

I see some of you are already getting excited because you anticipated what the handout would be next. So to demonstrate His love, then, God gave His only begotten Son.

[11:23] And Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines gift as something voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation. To a certain degree, all of us really understand the concept of a gift because we give gifts to those we love as well.

But if we're really honest with ourselves, why do we typically give gifts to people? That's right, we want to get something back, or we think they have done something to deserve those gifts in one form or another.

So I want to take just a moment here and have us consider what the Bible says about whether we have done anything to deserve a gift from God. So we'll go back to the Old Testament first and look at Genesis 6-5.

And Genesis 6-5 is the verse that says this. It says, Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. So listen to Genesis 6-5 again, and notice how emphatically the verse describes the intent of man's heart. It says, Then the Lord saw the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

[12:50] It's not a very encouraging verse, is it, when you just look at it from a stand-alone aspect. But that's not the only verse that gives us the idea.

that man is evil. The idea that man is evil is also throughout the New Testament as well. And we'll look at a couple of those cross-references.

Colossians 1-21 and Romans 5-10 are just two verses that remind us that even believers were once enemies of God. So I'll give you some time to flip over to Colossians there.

And Colossians 1-21 is the verse that says this. It says, And you who were once alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now he has reconciled.

So you see there that enemies is mentioned in the verse about believers, and that's the believer's former condition. And then if you flip over to Romans 5-10, you'll see the same idea again.

[14:00] Romans 5-10 says this. It says, For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

So again, that verse says, For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

So try to put yourself in God's place for a second. Knowing that every intent of the people was evil and that the people were your enemies, how likely would you have been to give the people a gift? And that's something that we really need to keep in mind and consider as we go through the verse. Because thinking about it from almost any angle from that aspect, almost all of us would have to admit that we wouldn't give a gift to an evil enemy.

But God gave a gift. And God didn't give just any gift. What gift did God give? Yeah, he gave his only begotten Son. And some people can get hung up on the word begotten and not all translations actually render the Greek to include the word begotten, but several do.

[15:15] So just in case yours, like the New King James, does mention begotten, let's consider what begotten does and does not mean here. Because the Greek word for only begotten suggests a one and only Son.

it doesn't necessarily convey the idea of a birth. So what it's really saying there is that the Son of God is the Father's one and only or his unique Son.

So it's trying to convey the uniqueness of Jesus there. And just in case you had any doubt about that, earlier in the Gospel of John, John made that clear that the Son of God has always existed.

So flip backward a few pages in your Bible to John 1. And we'll look at John 1, 1 through 5. In John 1, 1 through 5, say, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men, and the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

[16:31] Now skip down to John 1, 14. And that verse says, And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The word translated as begotten in John 1, 14 is the same word that's translated as begotten, John 3, 16. So you see from those references earlier in John that it affirms that the Son of God has always existed, that He became a man when God gave Him to the world.

So, let's look at it from another point of view, too. We hear from our study in Philippians that the Son of God was fully aligned with the plan. And here are Philippians 2, 5-8.

This is also a good Christmas as well when you think about it. But Philippians 2, 5-8 say, Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men, and being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.

That translation is a little bit stilted and kind of tough to follow. I actually like the English Standard Version's translation of these verses a little better because it makes them easier to understand.

[18:05] So here are Philippians 2, 5-8 out of the ESV. It says, Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form.

He humbled himself by being obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. So you see that Jesus was equal with God before he came to earth, but he didn't think that that was something he needed to hold on to.

He took it upon himself to humble himself and to come down even to the point of death on a cross. So Philippians 2, 5-8 clearly show that Jesus agreed with God's plan, and the verses also underscore the point that Jesus was always God, but he later became a man, like what we just talked about.

So think about this. Jesus, the creator of the universe and everything in it, became a man and humbled himself because God so loved the world. So do you see why I keep saying we need to let the significance of that soak in?

We can become so familiar with John 3, 16 that we really fail to grasp what it's trying to tell us there. And so once again, just think about that.

[19:30] The creator of the universe humbled himself because God so loved the world. So we can recap where we are for a second.

So far we've reminded ourselves that the source was God. The motivation was God's love for the world. The action resulting from that motivation was God's giving his only son to that world.

You notice so far that everything has been about God. And here's where we come in. Let's look at the response. The response is in the part of John 3, 16 which says that whoever believes in him. So the purpose of giving his son was to make God's great gift of eternal life available to anyone or to whoever believes in him. And of course, that's your next fill in the blank there if you didn't already have that.

The word translated whoever literally means all, every, each, or any. So in other words, God's gift is available to anyone.

[20:37] And we need to make the same comment here that we made earlier because we said that the phrase God so loved the world was an astounding statement because most Jews believe that God loved only Israel.

And when the verse mentions whoever, we again see that the words of the verse pertain to more people than just the Jews. What's the only requirement for receiving God's gift?

Believing. Believing, yes. The belief is the key part. And so on man's side, the gift is simply to be received, not earned. And a person is saved by believing or by trusting in Christ.

And yet from other passages in the Bible, we know that even our faith itself is a gift from God. You probably know where I'm going here, but Ephesians 2, 8 and 9 say, For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

So we see that even the faith is a gift of God. And then earlier in the Gospel of John, John said the same thing about the need for faith, and he also noted that faith is a gift of God.

[21 : 48] So look back again at John 1 and find verses 12 and 13. So John 1, 12 and 13 say this. They say, But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

So you see that people were born of the will of God. Before we leave the phrase, believes in him, we need to look at one more word, because in this verse, even the word translated as in is significant.

And I gave this to you in your handout, but the preposition translated as in is striking because it ordinarily means into. So it really gives the sense that genuine faith in Christ, in a sense, brings people into Christ, so that they rest in and become united with Christ.

And one commentator put it this way. He said, Not only do we Christians have faith in Jesus, our lives are in him. And he explained it like this. He said, A fish is in the sea, and a branch is in its vine, and a root is in the soil.

They cannot live without being joined to their respective spheres. So it is with Jesus' followers. We are spiritually united with the Lord and cannot survive outside of him. You know, that's a pretty good analogy when you think about it, because the fish is different than the water, and we're clearly different than Jesus, but a fish can't survive outside of the water, just like we Christians can't survive outside of God.

[23 : 33] So we just looked at the appropriate response to God's gift, and that appropriate response is belief. And when we believe and respond in faith, then we get the result.

And the result is summarizing the phrase, Should not perish, but have everlasting life. So once again, the result there, for your blanks is, should not perish, but have everlasting life.

And perish there means not annihilation, but rather a final destiny of ruin in hell. So the Bible clearly says, then, that believers are beneficiaries of eternal life, but non-believers are subject to God's wrath.

So here are just three cross-references to emphasize the point about God's wrath. Romans 1.18 says, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

And then Ephesians 5.6 says, Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

[24 : 44] And then later on in John chapter 3, just a few verses down from where we're focusing tonight, we see John 3.36.

And John 3.36 says, He who believes in the Son has everlasting life, and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

Nobody likes to talk about the wrath of God, but why do we need to make the point about the wrath of God? No love without his wrath. Exactly.

No love without his wrath is a good way to put it. And until people understand that they're subject to God's wrath, they don't realize their need for a Savior. And said another way, to fully appreciate the good news, we must first understand the bad news.

Fortunately for us, though, John 3.16 says that believers will not perish. What is going to happen to believers instead? Yep, believers will have eternal life.

[25 : 51] And this is just one of ten references to eternal life in John's Gospel. And here's an important point to think about, because eternal life refers not only to eternal quantity, but also a divine quality of the life we have.

It's a life of abundant joy and immeasurable blessing in the presence of God forever. And those who believe in Christ have that eternal life and already experience some of the blessings of it today in the present time.

We don't experience it fully yet, but we have it in some significant measure. And we already have it. It's not something that we'll get when we go on to heaven. We already have that eternal life now.

So think about that last part again. Those who believe in Christ have that eternal life and already experience its blessings in the present time, not yet fully, but in some significant measure. And we tend to think of eternal life as something that will happen in the future, but believers already have that life now. Because like we said, it's a new quality of life which a believer has now as a present possession, and the believer will have that forever.

[26:57] And to underscore the permanence of salvation, think about just two questions here. How long is eternal? It really is eternal, right?

And if we could lose our salvation, was it eternal? So that in itself shows that true believers can't lose their salvation because if we could lose it, it never was eternal in the first place.

And the Bible is very clear that eternal is what we have. I believe it's the King James that has everlasting in there as well, which of course means the same thing.

And Jesus himself actually underscored that point too later on in John, in John 11, 25, and 26.

That's when Jesus spoke these words to Martha shortly before raising Lazarus from the dead.

So John 11, 25, and 26 say, Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live.

[28:07] And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? So in verse 25 of John 11, Jesus doesn't merely say that he'll bring about the resurrection or that he'll be the cause of the resurrection.

Both of those things are true. But he also says something much stronger by the way he phrases it. He says, I am the resurrection and the life. So resurrection from the dead and genuine eternal life and fellowship with God are so closely tied to Jesus that they're embodied in him and they can only be found in relationship to him.

So that goes back to what we mentioned earlier about believers having their lives in Christ just like a fish has its life in the water. So let me read John 11, 26 one more time because the question that Jesus asked Martha is the same question that Jesus asked everyone even today.

And that's the verse that says, And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? So that's really one question I want everybody to think about tonight.

We know John 3, 16 from an intellectual standpoint. But do we really believe it? And if yes we really believe it then the next question to think about is do we act like we believe it as we go through our lives?

[29:29] I'm not going to ask anybody to answer that question out loud but those are the two questions if you get nothing else to think about think about those two things. Do we believe it? And if we do believe it do we act like we believe it?

So we made it through the entire verse now and we've been reminded how John 3, 16 is a concise statement of the gospel. And J.B. Bond and others summarized John 3, 16 similar to this.

And this is where your handout deviates a little bit but I think you'll get this part too. So the summary is the greatest giver with the greatest motive provided the greatest gift so that those who do the greatest response can have the greatest deliverance and the greatest relationship.

You might have noticed a pattern there but I'll repeat that one more time just in case you didn't get all of those. The word greatest applies to all cases. Exactly. The greatest giver with the greatest motive provided the greatest gift so that those who do the greatest response can have the greatest deliverance and the greatest relationship.

One more time now. And actually there is a slightly longer version of that that takes every word or two of John 3, 16 and implies the greatest something to that.

[30:52] But I figured you'd get the idea if I just hit the highlights there. I also like the way John Piper describes the verse in the gospel itself with four D's as in delta.

And so here's where you'll have to deviate from the verse a little bit. John Piper talks about the danger which is perishing. So the danger is perishing. Then he says the design is love.

So the design is love. The duty then is faith. Or you could put belief in there if you wanted to as well. So the duty is either faith or belief.

And then the destiny of course is eternal life. So that's a good way to summarize the gospel very quickly as well using just John 3.16.

So let's think about how the verse applies today because everyone in the world is in one of two situations. Unbelievers are in danger of perishing so for them John 3.16 is a clear call to repentance and faith.

[31 : 59] But for believers believers already enjoy their ultimate destiny. They already have eternal life. We just haven't fully experienced it yet. So that's what makes John 3.16 such a great verse for believers to review as we're approaching the Thanksgiving holiday.

We already know John 3.16 intellectually that if we fully believe the words of John 3.16 and internalize the verse so that we act upon it we can always be thankful.

And I wanted to end up with the words of Psalm 107.1 That's the verse that says Oh give thanks to the Lord for he is good for his mercy endures forever.

And when we really believe John 3.16 then we truly can say give thanks to the Lord for he is good for his mercy endures forever. music