

So Loved
John 3:16
Pastor John Miller

John Chapter 3 and verse 16. But I want to share with you one of my favorite stories about a Christmas incident. It goes like this. A little girl came home from Sunday school triumphantly waving her paper, "Mommy," she said, "my teacher says that I drew the most unusual Christmas picture she has ever seen." The mother studied the picture for a moment and concluded it was indeed a peculiar Christmas picture. "This is wonderfully drawn, but why have you made all these people riding on the back of an airplane?" the mother gently asked. "It's the flight to Egypt," the little girl said, with a hint of disappointment that the picture's meaning was not immediately obvious. "Oh," the mother said, "certainly. Well, why is this mean-looking man in front of the plane?" "That's Pontius the pilot," the girl said, now visibly impatient.

"I see. And here you have Mary and Joseph and the baby," the mother ventured. She's studying the picture silently for a moment. She summoned the courage to ask, "But who is the fat man sitting behind Mary?" The little girl sighed. "Can't you tell? That's round John Virgin."

I love that story. Not everybody gets their facts at Christmas straight. They don't always understand the story, but more importantly, many do not understand the meaning and the significance of Christmas. What is the meaning and the significance of Christmas? I think it's summarized for us in one verse and that verse is John 3:16. I want you to read it with me if you know it. Can we get it up on the screen? Okay, there it is. Let's read it together. 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. I believe that this one verse describes the meaning of Christmas. Someone has said that John 3:16 is the entire Bible in one verse. I love that. If you could take the whole Bible and put its message in one verse, it would be about God's love in sending his Son to redeem fallen man, and that whoever believes in Jesus Christ will not perish but have everlasting life.

What a blessed verse that is. Now, I want to break John 3:16 down for you and tie it into the Christmas message. I want to give you five things about John 3:16. First we see the lover. Notice it in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world." God so loved. Who's the lover? It is God. God is the one who loves us. Someone said in a poem, "Of the wonderful things in the Bible I see, this is the dearest, that God loves me." God loves you tonight. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter what you've been doing. It doesn't matter where you've been, what you've gone through. God loves you. Some things about God's love, it is great. The Bible says in Ephesians 2:4, "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us." God has a great love.

It's interesting that the word in John 3:16, love, is the Greek word *agape* or *agape*. The New Testament was written in Greek called Koine Greek, a common language Greek. And we find in the New Testament, there's this couple different words for love, but in the Greek language, there are actually three different words used for love. We use the word love from everything from I

love chocolate chip cookies to I love my wife and I love my kids, and I love to skateboard, or whatever it might be. Well, obviously my love for my wife and my family is different than my love for chocolate chip cookies, right? You're supposed to say yes. Some of you, I'm looking at, like, "Uh no, I really like chocolate chip." I'll pray for you.

Certainly your love for your wife or your husband is different than your love for cookies or a certain kind of cookie. In the Greek, we have the word eros. Not found in the Bible, by the way. It's erotic, or we get the word erotic from it. It means a sensual love or a love that just wants to receive. And in the Bible, we find another word translated love in the English language, it's the word phileo. We get our word Philadelphia from it or brotherly love. It speaks of a kinship love or a fondness kind of love. But in the Greek, this word love in John 3:16 is the word agape or agape. And Christianity is what really coined this term because this is a giving love. This is a sacrificial love. This is a self-denying love. This is a love that no one can fathom or comprehend.

It is a love seen in God's sending his Son into the world to die for our sins, which is a great love. God's love is also infinite. Ephesians 3:19, "That you might know the love of Christ which passes knowledge," and I might add, understanding. You'll never be able to understand why God would love you. You'll never be able to understand the greatness of God's love, the vastness of God's love. God's love is infinite. It transcends us. I love the song titled Love of God, and that stanza that says, "The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen could ever tell. It goes beyond the farthest star and it reaches to the lowest hell. If you with ink the oceans fill and were the sky of parchment made, and every stalk on earth a quill and every man a scribe by trade, to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry. Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky."

God's love is great and God's love is infinite, and it's beyond our comprehending and understanding. God's love is uninfluenceable. Uninfluenceable. You know what that means? It means that there's nothing that you can do to make God love you more. And there's nothing that you can do to make God love you less. And the reason being is because God loves you with that perfect love. He can't love you any more, and nothing we do makes him love us any less. But it's kind of like the sunshine. I like to think of the sun as a picture of God's love. Sun is always shining, right? But you can put up an umbrella or you can get in the shade and you can block yourself from the sun. Or clouds can come in and you don't see the sun. You don't feel the sun. You don't experience the sun's warmth and brightness.

God is always loving us, even when the clouds blow in. Even when the clouds come in and we're walking in darkness, God still loves us. It never changes. If you face the sun, the shadows fall behind you, right? If you turn your back to the sun, the shadows fall in front of you. We need to keep our eyes fixed upon the sun, the Son of God. Amen? And when we do, we will walk in the light. We need to follow him in the light, and then we will experience the light of his love and the warmth of his love in our life. So it's uninfluenceable.

Fourthly, it is unchanging. God's love is unchanging. Why? Because the Bible declares God is love. Now, that's not to say he's loving in an abstract sense. It doesn't say love is God. God is

love. What does that mean? As to his very nature and to his very character, God will always be true to who he is. He will never violate his own nature, and God is unchanging. Theologians have a big word for that. They call it immutable or the immutability of God. God never changes. So his love never changes.

Everything changes, right? If you've been out of high school for like 50 years, go back and look at your annual from that year you graduated and check out the pictures there. Looking at those pictures, you'll see you change, others change, everyone change. I'll never forget going to my 25th high school reunion. That was scary. I mean, people introduced them, "Remember, we were good friends." "I don't think I know you, dude. You're messed up." No, I didn't say that. I just thought that. We change, don't we? You change. I change. Everything's changed. Only God is immutable. Only God is eternal and immutable and unchanging. He always has been, always will be, and his love never changes.

And lastly, his love is eternal. In Jeremiah 31:3, "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore, with loving kindness, have I drawn you." I love that verse. "I have loved you," God says, "with an everlasting love, and therefore with loving kindness, I've drawn you." I believe you're here tonight because God wants you to hear that he loves you. God is saying at Christmas, "I love you." That's what Christmas is about, the love of God and God sending his only-begotten Son into the world that we might be saved. Because I want you to notice secondly in John 3:16 the object of his love. It's in the little word there, world. The world, the world. So God is the lover. The object is the world. Now, who or what is the world? The answer, all mankind. Everyone here tonight, everyone that has ever lived, rich, poor, bond, free, Black, white, red, yellow, whatever that is, if there's green people out there, someone, God loves them too.

For before anything existed, there was God, and God spoke it all into existence. He is the ultimate cause of all things. He's the eternal cause of all things, God. And God loved the world of mankind, human beings. Now, God created man in his image and likeness, gave man free will, and man chose to disobey God and rebel against God. So man is separated from God. And man is in rebellion toward God, and man is fighting with God, and running from God. The Bible says, "All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The Bible says, "There's no one righteous," by God's standards, "No, not one." We've all sinned, but yet in our sinful state, in our rebellious state, living in darkness and running from God, God loved us. God loves us. The object of God's love is the world, mankind. Romans 5:6, "For when we were without strength, at just the right time, Christ died for the ungodly."

Oh, what amazing love. The story is told of a theologian by the name of Karl Barth. Years ago he was over here in America lecturing at Princeton University, Theological University, and at the end of his lecture, one of the American students asked him a question to this great theologian. He said, "Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever passed through your mind?" The famous theologian, Barth, stopped for a minute and thought and bowed his head, and then without hesitation, he said, "That Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Nothing more profound than that, to think that Jesus loves me, that Jesus loves you, even though we've

sinned and fallen away from him.

But I want you to notice thirdly in this verse, the gift of his love. So we see the lover is God, the object is the world, and the gift of his love is his only-begotten Son. You see it there in that verse. God's gift was his only... Now, that word only is unique, his only-begotten, his only unique Son. No one like Jesus, no one. He sets apart from everyone else. And God so loved the world that he gave his Son. This is the Christmas story. In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman under the law to redeem those that were under the law. Now, the Bible tells us in Luke Chapter 1 that when the time had come, God sent the angel Gabriel to a little village called Nazareth. We were there a few months ago, in the area of Galilee, and to a virgin whose name was Mary.

Now, when an angel shows up at your house, especially the angel Gabriel, that's a scary thing. We've had our doorbell ringing a lot like ding-dong, ding-dong. You know it's UPS and FedEx and everything. They're laying stuff on the porch and a lot of doorbell rings late. Can you imagine opening the door and Gabriel standing there? Like, "Wow." So Mary was naturally frightened. Mary was probably about 13, 14 or 15 years of age. I think at the farthest end, she might've been 16. She was a very young girl, a young teenager. And the angel came to her and said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. Fear not. For you are going to bear in your womb, the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world, and he shall be great and he'll sit upon the throne of his father, David."

And Mary responded, not with questioning that it would happen, but Mary's response was, "How can this be, seeing that I know not a man?" Mary was a virgin. She hadn't consummated a relationship, in legal marriage, like we have today, with Joseph. It hadn't happened yet. So she said, "How's this going to happen?" And the angel told her, he said, "The power of the highest, the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and that which is conceived in your womb will be through the work of the Holy Spirit."

I preached an entire sermon Sunday morning on the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. It's the foundation of all of our hopes and all of our future and all of our dreams and Christmas that God actually came down and became a man. God incarnate, God in flesh, Emmanuel, God with us. Every bit God, as though he were not man, every bit man, as though he were not God, in one person. Fully God, fully man, one person, Jesus Christ, so that he could save mankind and bring us back to God. What a marvel. What a wonder that is.

Now Joseph, actually, because they were engaged, freaked out. Rightfully so. He was heartbroken. He thought, "Oh, no, Mary's pregnant. I know it wasn't me, and this is a tragedy." But he loved her and he was minded not to see her punished. So he wanted to put her away privately. And while Joseph went to bed that night, God sent an angel, maybe Gabriel once again, and he had a dream that night, and the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary, your engaged wife, for that which is conceived in her womb is the work of the Holy Spirit, and he shall be great and he'll sit upon the throne of David and he will be the king of Israel." And the promise that God gave to David in the Old Testament of the seed who would reign

upon the throne is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Now, in Luke Chapter 2, we find that Caesar Augustus at this time, and this is toward the end of Mary's pregnancy, he sends out a decree that all the world should be taxed. And so everyone had to return to the home of their ancestral birth to enroll for the sake of taxation. So Mary now, in the last stages of pregnancy, had to go from Nazareth all the way down to Bethlehem, and they had to enroll for taxation. That's a 90-mile trip. She's nine months pregnant. Now you're nine months pregnant, you take a 90-mile donkey ride, it will induce labor for sure. You will go in the labor.

And when she got there, she started labor and they couldn't find room in the inn because it was crowded with the pilgrims coming to enroll for taxation. So the innkeeper sent them out to a stable, a humble lowly stable. And Christ was born in humility and he was laid in a manger. Now you think if God came into the world, he would build his own hospital, put a big star on the top with lights shooting out from it, and a big neon sign, Messiah is born, come and see. But no, he's born in humility. He's born in isolation. The only people that were awake at that time of night were the shepherds, watching their sheep by night in the fields of Bethlehem, and the sky lit up with the glory of God. The angels appeared and they told these shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill toward men. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ, the Lord."

For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior. Notice he didn't say for unto you is born this day in the City of David a politician. Praise God for that. A military leader, a financier, a great intelligent scientist. A Savior. A Savior has been born. "And you'll find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And these humble shepherds that were lowest on the caste system at that time, they ran quickly and said, "Let's go and see this thing which has come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us." And they climbed and they found the babe as the angels had told them, and they worshiped him. And they went everywhere telling everybody about what they'd seen, what they'd heard. And Mary pondered these things and kept them in her heart. She thought, "What kind of miracle this is, that I would be chosen to be the mother of our Lord and our Savior." So we find that the gift of his love is God sending his Son the Messiah, the Lord of heaven and earth.

Someone said, "God wrapped his love in flesh and blood and sent him down to man." Jesus is the only person that existed before his conception in the womb of Mary. Jesus is the only person, I think this is kind of cool, that chose to be born. When you were younger, maybe your kids, when they get all frustrated, "I didn't ask to be born." You ever heard that? "You borned me. I didn't ask to be born. Not my fault." Jesus chose to be born. When we speak of God sending his Son, we also need to remember that his Son came willingly, that he came voluntarily. Jesus wasn't coerced or pressured, that he volunteered for that rescue mission to come into this world. So he came to die. He came to die. That's why he took on humanity. But I want you to notice, fourthly, John 3:16, the reception of his love. The reception of his love, whosoever believes in him. Whosoever believes in him. Stop right there. What does whosoever mean? The word whosoever means whosoever.

I hope you appreciate that. I studied all week to get that. It means anybody. It means everybody. Jesus died for every human being, past, present, and future on that cross, and it would take the death of God to have that kind of atoning power for the sins of the world. You couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. We were sinful. We could die for our own sins, but not for someone else's. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. Whosoever. Whosoever means you're not too sinful, you're not too good, you're not too old, you're not too young, you're not too rich, you're not too poor. It doesn't matter what color your skin is. Anyone, whosoever, that... What's the next word? Believeth in him. Notice that, in him. Believe. Now, let me explain what it means to believe in Jesus Christ.

It doesn't mean that you just believe that there was a Jesus. It doesn't mean that you just believe in God. I hear people say, "Well, I believe in God. Isn't that enough?" No. Demons believe there's a God and they're not saved. It's not just an intellectual belief. What does the Bible mean when it says we believe in him? There's synonyms for that word. They would be trust, they would be receive, they would be rely upon. Whosoever trust in him receives him, relies upon him, shall receive eternal life. You see I brought up a stool with me. I want to use it as an illustration of what the Bible means when we say to believe in Jesus. This is what it's like. I can look at the stool and I can say, "Ah, that's a stool. I believe there's a stool, wooden, painted black. And I actually believe that if I sit on this stool, it'll hold me." And I can talk and talk and talk about what a nice stool it is and I believe it'll hold me.

That's what a lot of people have, a faith that hasn't committed. When John 3:16 says, "So whosoever believes," this is how I would illustrate it. Believes means I go from believing with my head to committing with my body, and I put my weight on Christ. That's what it means to believe in Jesus Christ, that I trust him, that I commit my life to him, that I put my weight upon him. We sing nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. It's not Jesus plus being a good person. It's not Jesus plus religion. It's not Jesus plus rites or rituals, I need to be baptized and live a good life. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to his cross I cling. And I put all my weight on Jesus Christ.

Have you trusted him tonight? Have you put all of your weight on Jesus Christ? Do you feel satisfied because you believe there's a God or you do religious deeds, but you haven't sat down on Jesus? You haven't put your weight on him. And this is how it works. When he died on the cross, his death was a substitute for you and me. He was sinless. We are sinners, and we should have died, but he took our place. But that death on the cross cannot be appropriated to me until I put my weight on Jesus Christ, until I trust him and him alone. I can't trust anything else but Jesus Christ to save me. That's what it means to believe on Jesus Christ. Notice believe in him, that he came to die, that he took my place on the cross, that he rose from the dead, and now I receive by faith God's gift of salvation.

The Bible says it like this, "By grace you have been saved." Grace is unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor. But that salvation comes through faith. That's sitting on the stool, trusting that stool's going to hold my weight, by faith. So by grace through faith, you have been saved. It's not of yourself. It's a gift of God. Now, we like gifts, right, at Christmastime? My granddaughter

came in the door this afternoon and I rushed her over to the tree and showed her all the gifts. She's probably thinking, "I hope they're all for me," kind of a thing. We're going to open them and celebrate them. The cool thing about children are, they don't have hangups about accepting gifts. When you get real old, you're kind of like, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that." You're thinking you're stoked and you're like, do that. But you're kind of like you have to be cool and you don't tear into your packages and look excited. You're just kind of mellow and let them pile up. The kids are just ripping open their presents. They're opening presents that aren't theirs, running around the house. "I'll open it for you. I'll open it for you." Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me must come as a little child." You come as a little child and you put your weight on Jesus Christ. That's what it means to believe. That's what it means to receive God's gift.

And last but not least, the results of his love. What are the results of his love? Should not perish, but have everlasting life. Should not perish, but have everlasting life. If you receive him, if you trust in him, you will have, not might have, not maybe have, not hope to have, not if you're lucky you will have. Notice the certainty of everlasting life. You will have everlasting life. Now, what is everlasting life? Well, it's not just quantity, not just living forever. It's quality and it begins the moment you put your weight on Jesus Christ, the moment you say, "God, forgive me for my sins, come into my heart, be my Lord, and Savior. I believe on you. I trust in you. I receive you."

That very moment, the life of God comes into your soul and you have new life. It's a life on a new level. It's life on a new plane. It's a life you were created to have and to know and experience. Jesus, in John 17, when he was praying to his father, he said, "Father, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." This is eternal life. Knowing God is eternal life. He that knows the Son has life. He that knows not the Son and has not the Son, has not the life of God. Do you have God's life in your soul tonight? You're not going to find Christmas under the tree if Jesus isn't in your heart. Is he in your heart? There's a door to your heart. It has a knob only on the inside, and Jesus said, "I'm knocking and if you hear my voice and open that door, I'll come in, and I'll sit down and I'll have fellowship with you, and you with me."

He wants to live in your heart. There was no room in the inn when he was born, when he first came. Is there room in your heart? Are you too busy with your life, with your career, with your own concerns and your own affairs that you don't have time for Jesus Christ? I don't understand that you can open presents at Christmas, but not take the gift of eternal life that God wants to give you tonight. The gift is eternal life. The package is Jesus Christ. You want the gift? You've got to accept it in Jesus Christ. And if you trust in him and receive him, he will come into your life. He will forgive your sin and give you the hope of heaven. That's what Christmas is all about. For God's Christmas tree is the cross, and Jesus died that we might have life. Amen. Let's pray.