

Salvation: God Gives

John 3:16

Rev. Brian Bill

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A pastor met a church member out in the community and asked why he didn't attend services on a regular basis. The man replied that the sermons were so-so and lamented, *"Every time I go to church you sing the same songs!"* The pastor asked him which songs he was referring to. The man replied, *"O Little Town of Bethlehem and What Child Is This?"*

Whether you're here every week or once a year, we're glad you're here!

I love how that song answers questions about what kind of Child Jesus was.

*This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and Angels sing
The King of Kings salvation brings; let loving hearts enthrone Him.*

In order to better understand *who* Christ is and *why* the Father sent Him to earth, we're going to set up shop in one verse of Scripture today. This verse contains deep truth but it comes with some danger – because it's so well known, you may nod when you hear it or just nod off. Familiarity can breed contempt or it can breed boredom.

It's been called the theme verse of the entire Bible and the gospel in a nutshell. It's extremely popular – when I typed it into Google, 1.7 billion results came up. That's pretty amazing because the verse contains only 24 words.

If you watch sports you've seen the reference to this verse waved in the stands and in black under Tim Tebow's eyes. Anyone want to take a guess what the verse is?

Listen to John 3:16: ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."***

The great preacher G. Campbell Morgan was intimidated by this passage and wrote these words: *"This is a text I never attempted to preach on, though I have gone around it and around it. It is too big. When I have read it, there is nothing else to say."*

I like what Max Lucado writes: *“If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder. The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human. And God’s treatment is prescribed in John 3:16.”*

This is a great Christmas text. We’re going to unpack it phrase by phrase. Here’s our outline.

- God loves
- God lavishes
- We lean
- We live

1. God loves. Here’s how it begins: *“For God so loved the world…”* The word *“for”* introduces a cause or clause (no, not Santa) and puts this text in context. If we go back a few verses, we read that during the time of Moses, God’s people experienced a plague as a result of provoking God. With the poison of snakes in their veins, all they had to do was look at a pole with a bronze serpent on it and they wouldn’t perish. Listen to John 3:14-15: *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* God gave them a solution for their sinfulness.

For *“God.”* This verse begins with God. This is precisely where the Bible begins: *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”* And listen to the beginning of John’s Gospel: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* Everything begins with God and ends with God. The sooner we realize that life is all about giving glory to God and not to ourselves, the better off we will be. It’s not about you. It’s all about Him.

I love that little word *“so”* because it shows us that God doesn’t love a little, but a lot. The volume of His love is cranked up high. The word *“love”* is the word *agape*, which refers to an unconditional covenant kind of love. It’s a verb, meaning it’s a word of action.

And notice that God loves the whole *“world.”* This would have been a shock to Jewish listeners who thought God only loved them. He loves the Quad Cities and the Twin Cities. God loves those on the west end and those who live in Geneseo. He loves those who live in Bettendorf and those in Port Byron. He loves Moline and Milan, Andalusia and Aledo, Davenport and Rock Island...and everything in

between. He loves refugees and the rejected. He loves the little, the least and the lost. And he loves the powerful and popular. He loves Iowa *and* Illinois, even though Wisconsin is the Promised Land!

Perhaps you saw the viral video this week of a woman who went on an unloving racial rant toward two Hispanic women. The words she used were hateful and wrong. He loves all races, nationalities and every ethnicity. God is not bigoted or racist like so many of us are.

When the angel made his announcement to the shepherds in Luke 2:11, he said, ***“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”*** The Christmas drama is filled with diversity as we’re introduced to upper class foreign astrologers and lower class Jewish shepherds. And the cast of Christmas characters is made up of different generations and both genders - Joseph and Mary were teens while Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna were senior citizens.

Listen. While you may not feel loved by others, God loves you more than you can even imagine! You matter to the Majesty! He takes great delight in you, no matter what you’ve done. He loves you no matter how you’ve been living. He treasures you in spite of all your transgressions. Lucado writes, *“If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it!”*

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, the printer carelessly allowed sections to fall on the floor of his shop. One day the printer’s daughter came in and picked up a piece of paper on which she found just the words: *“God so loved the world that He gave...”* She treasured these words because she had been told that God was to be feared and could only be approached through acts of penance. As she kept reading these words, she became more joyful, and her whole countenance changed. Her mother asked what was going on so the little girl handed her the crumpled piece of paper. She read it and was perplexed: *“He gave...what was it He gave?”* For a moment the girl hesitated and then perceptively replied, *“I don’t know, but if He loved us well enough to give us anything, we need not be afraid of Him!”*

God has given us so much...but the best is the gift of His Son.

2. God lavishes. The next phrase helps us see that God loves us so much that He lavishes on us the gift of His Son: ***“...that He gave His only Son...”*** In this

season of gift giving, let's not forget that Jesus Christ is the greatest gift ever given. The word **“gave”** has the idea of sacrifice. Isaiah 9:6 says that a **“son is given.”** 1 John 4:9-10: ***“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. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”***

Most of us know that the baby Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was also the birthplace of King David. As a boy, David tended sheep on these hills where shepherds still watch their sheep to this day. The little town of Bethlehem is known as the house of Bread, which is appropriate since Jesus is the bread of life. It's also known as the house of meat, because Bethlehem, located just six miles from the Temple in Jerusalem, is also where fields were full of sheep ripe for slaughter and sacrifice.

The center of spiritual life in Judaism was the slaughter of animals. Every day, two lambs were sacrificed in the temple – that's 730 each year. In addition, thousands of lambs were needed at Passover and other religious rituals. The day after the final Sabbath before Passover, shepherds from Bethlehem drove thousands of lambs into Jerusalem for sacrifice. We call this day Palm Sunday. Listen to what Leonard Sweet writes: *“There were two processions on that first Palm Sunday. One was an unwilling procession of thousands of perfect lambs headed into the city by Bethlehem shepherds. The other was a willing procession of the one Perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”*

These special shepherds followed certain techniques and rituals when baby lambs were born. Sweet continues: *“Bethlehem lambs born for slaughter were special lambs. To prevent harm and self-injury from thrashing about after birth on their spindly legs, newborn lambs were wrapped in swaddling cloths. Then they were placed in a manger or feeding trough, where they could calm down out of harm's way...the shepherds who gathered around the Bethlehem stable where the Lamb of God was born were not witnessing anything new, except who was in the manger: the most important sacrificial Lamb who had ever been born, the Lamb who closed down the slaughterhouse of sacrifice, the perfect Lamb of God.”*

Friends, God **“gave”** His Son as final sacrifice. He was born in order to die. Do you know what time Jesus died on the cross? It was at the ninth hour, which was three o'clock in the afternoon, the exact time that the Passover lamb would have been sacrificed in the temple!

The phrase **“His only Son”** is very significant. The idea is that Jesus is the *“unique, one and only”* Son. Some older translations use, **“only begotten Son.”** I heard about a young boy who was trying to quote John 3:16 and when he came to this part he said, **“For God so loved the world that He gave his only forgotten son...”** There’s more truth to that than he realizes – in the midst of Christmas, it’s way too easy to forget the Son.

Instead of forgetting, we’re called to put our faith in the Father’s only Son and ultimate sacrifice...

3. We lean. While it’s helpful to know that God loves and God lavishes, we also need to lean into Him: **“...that whoever believes in Him...”** Aren’t you glad that the word, **“whoever”** is in this verse? God loves the whole world, which means everyone and he offers salvation to whoever, which means you! He loves the whole mass of people and He loves me in my mess! I love the words to that classic song: *“Whosoever surely meaneth me!”* After all, who isn’t a *whoever*?

The word **“believe”** is quite rich. Many years ago, Bible translators in the New Hebrides islands were struggling to find an appropriate word for *believe*. They came upon a solution accidentally while hunting with a tribesman. After bagging a large deer and carrying it on a pole along a steep mountain path, they returned home and plopped into some porch chairs. As they did so, the native exclaimed in his language, *“My, it’s good to stretch yourself out here and rest.”*

The translator immediately reached for paper and pencil and recorded the phrase that ended up in the translation of John 3:16 – *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever stretcheth himself out on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”* When we lean on the Lord He gives us life. Stretch out on Christ and find rest.

While it’s important to acknowledge who Christ is in your head and even be affected by that in your heart, the key is to engage your will and commit yourself unreservedly and wholeheartedly to Him. To believe means to, *“trust in, rely on and lean into.”* The idea is to fully surrender to the Savior, to give yourself up to Him, to take yourself out of your own keeping and entrust yourself into His keeping. Faith is believing that God is who He says He is and will do what He has promised to do.

Some of us expect something more complicated than this, a more sophisticated salvation. Doesn't the Bible say, "*God helps those who help themselves?*" Uh, no. That's not even in the Bible. We can't help ourselves. Our good works don't work. Being good is not good enough because no one is good enough. The issue is not right behavior, but right belief. The only way for sinners to be saved is by repenting and receiving the Savior, by leaning on the Lord Jesus Christ. John 1:12 says, "***Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.***"

Observe also that not everyone will benefit from what Christ has done. The offer is universal but the application is exclusive – salvation is only through Jesus Christ and is applied only for those who believe and receive Him.

God *loves* and God *lavishes*. When we *lean* into Him we *live*.

4. We live. I love how this verse ends: "***...should not perish but have eternal life.***" Would you notice that the only negative aspect of this verse is found in this phrase? To "***perish***" means to be eternally separated from God. Another word for this is Hell, which is a place of eternal and conscious judgment, described as a place of darkness, weeping, gnashing of teeth, eternal fire, and torment.

I love the word "***but***" here because it shows a contrast - we don't have to perish but can instead have "***eternal life.***" Most of us have received Christmas cards that declare, "Peace on Earth," or "Joy to the World," or the more secular "Seasons Greetings." Have you ever gotten a card with this Christmas caption – "Saved from Hell?" What you do with Immanuel will determine where you spend eternity.

We've looked at the verse that comes before John 3:16, so now let's ponder what comes after. Here's verse 17: "***For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.***" Jesus was sent on a search and save mission. He didn't come to condemn but to convert sinners. Check out Ezekiel 18:23: "***Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?***"

Look now at John 3:18: "***Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.***" This verse teaches two surprising truths.

- **If you believe in Christ you will not be condemned**
- **If you don't believe, you're condemned already**

In other words, if you choose to not be saved, you are condemned right now and you'll be condemned in Hell forever. Do nothing and you'll go to Hell. That's where everyone is headed. The only way to avoid that destination is by being converted through faith in the finished work of the Savior, who stood in as your substitute when He paid the price for all your sins by dying in your place.

If you are saved, you will not perish but instead you have eternal life. I like the little word *“have”* because it means, *“to have and hold, to have in your hands,”* implying continued possession. John 5:24: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”***

I am more sinful than I ever believed and more loved than I ever dared to imagine. God gave the Word in order to save the world and that means whoever...and that means you.

A young boy once came up to a missionary and said, *“I love you and I want you to have this.”* He pulled from a straw basket the most beautiful shell the missionary had ever seen. As she admired its beauty, she recognized it as a special shell only found on the far side of the island; a half-day's walk from the village. When she asked the boy about his journey, he smiled and said, *“Long walk part of gift.”*

Crucial to Christmas is this truth... that God loved the world so much that he made that long walk to come from where He was to where we are. When it was impossible for us to reach out to Him, He reached out to us.

God loves and lavishes. Let's lean so we can live.

The greater context of this text is found at the beginning of John 3 where we read of an encounter between a man named Nicodemus and Jesus. I guess because this is Christmas Day we could call him “Old Saint Nick,” but actually it's better to call him “Old Sinner Nick.” He came to Jesus at night because he didn't want any of his buddies to see that he was on a spiritual search. When he finds Christ he pays Him a compliment and then is immediately jarred by what Jesus said to him in

John 3:3: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”***

I first came across this verse when I was in college and was sitting in a Bible study. I ended up in this gathering because my college roommate had the courage to tell me I wasn't a Christian. After I blew up at him I realized he was right. That led me to this group of guys who had open Bibles on their laps. I was using a borrowed Bible and when I saw this verse it was in red so I knew it was important: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”***

I stopped the Bible study and told these guys that I didn't have a clue what this verse meant. They spent the rest of the time walking me through this chapter to help me see that just as I had a physical birth in order to have life, I needed a spiritual birth in order to have eternal life. We then landed on John 3:16.

After the study I went back to my dorm room and finished reading the entire Gospel of John. I then closed my eyes and prayed, what was probably the first prayer I ever prayed from my heart, putting my faith and trust in Christ as my substitute, leaning into the Lord as my Savior and Leader. I finally understood that God loves and He lavishes. And because I leaned on Him, I was given eternal life.

I love what Corrie Ten Boom once said: *“If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost.”* It's time today to make sure that Jesus is born in you.

Invitation

You can do that right now by praying this prayer:

“I don't understand how you can accept me when I don't measure up. But I get it now that you love me so lavishly that you sent your Son to die for my sins on the cross. I confess that I am a sinner and I turn from the way I've been living. I need you to be my Savior. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under your lordship for the rest of my life. Thank you for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so that I can be born again. I lean into you now by faith so that I can live with you forever. Make me into the person you want me to be.”

Closing Song: Precious Promise

Oh what a precious promise, O what a gift of love!