

JOHN 3:16

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.(KJV)

Main Points

1. God's love; 2. The meaning of "the world"; 3. A condition set forth; 4. The ground of belief

Background

The Gospel of St. John was written by John, one of the sons of Zebedee, also one of the faithful eleven apostles. John wrote his Gospel at some time between 80AD and 98AD most likely in Ephesus. The purpose of John's Gospel was to clearly affirm, for all ages, the divinity of Jesus. In so doing, John also refuted suggestions by early heretics (e.g., Cerinthus) that Jesus was not the incarnate Son of God, but merely human. History places John's ministry in the area of Ephesus, where his readership would have been primarily gentile Christians. But as we can attest, John's readership has grown. Amen?

What mortal could better know the heart of Jesus than John, the "disciple whom Jesus loved?"

John 13:23-25

23 Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved.

24 Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him, that he should ask who it should be of whom he spake.

25 He then lying on Jesus' breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it?

Clearly, John's relationship with Jesus was especially close. As he reclined against Him at the last supper, John probably could hear and feel His heart beating within His chest. Of the apostles, John is the closest to Jesus' heart. We can know this because the Holy Spirit cannot lie, and could not inspire John to exaggerate his relationship with the Lord. John was best qualified to tell us the intimate truths which Jesus spoke of Himself. John was acutely aware that Jesus was the Son made flesh. And, very likely, felt the love of Jesus more intensely than anyone short of glory.

Now to the text.

Point 1: God's love

The Scriptures tell us that “God is love.” The Scriptures also tell us that God has many other attributes. He is holy, omniscient, immutable, omnipotent, just, wise, and perfect, to name some. However, modern Bible teaching has emphasized that God is love almost to the exclusion of all other attributes, except for holiness. Look at John 3:36. “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” Within the very same chapter, we see that God is also wrath. To rightly understand the meaning of John 3:16, we must realize that God is not only love. Although it is difficult for our finite minds, we must try to hold all His attributes together when we think of God and when we read His Word.

The love of John 3:16 is a special love. He “so loved”. It is an exceeding love. It is a sacrificial love beyond understanding: “that He gave His only begotten Son.” It is a purposeful love: “that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It is an effectual love that promises to prevent perishing and give life. It is an eternal love because the Lamb was slain from foundation of the world (Rev 13:8). In the depths of eternity past, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit took counsel within the Godhead to sacrifice the Only Begotten to save believers. The reward of His work will extend to eternity future.

The object of God's special love is “the world.” How we understand “the world” is critical to the meaning of the passage because it determines the scope of God's saving love. Often, this passage is employed as evidence that Jesus died for the sins of all mankind (i.e., universal or general atonement) because “the world” is taken to mean all mankind. In our time, the popular interpretation of John 3:16 has been that Jesus died to provide potential salvation for all humanity. Salvation can be had by anyone who will believe, and everyone has the ability to believe. In this view, salvation hinges or rests upon an act of the human will, and regeneration follows, rather than precedes, belief. So, let's examine the meaning of “the world.”

Point 2. The meaning of “the world” in John 3:16

The Greek word used here by John is “kosmos.” The word means adornment and generally is used to describe creation broadly or narrowly. Vines Expository

Dictionary says that “kosmos” describes all mankind in John 3:16. I mention this because it is a commonly available book, which you may use. I like Vines and use it, but I have to disagree with them on this one. (I know. Who am I to be saying Vines is wrong? Nobody, that’s for sure. But, I am not relying solely on my own interpretation. Others, more able and learned than I, also disagree with Vines on this point.)

I suggest to you that the meaning of “the world” in John 3:16 is that Jesus is the savior of not only the Jews, but the savior of people from all nations. Having been God’s chosen people for so long, the Jews believed that the Messiah was coming just for them, and couldn’t believe that God sent His Son to reconcile “all” men unto Himself. The Jews should have known that Messiah was for all men because God said through the prophets that He would call them His people who were not His people (i.e., the Gentiles). But, because Jesus had come for the whole world and not just them, He was a stumbling stone to the Jews. John 17:9 is a clear indication that all humanity was not on His mind as he prepared to go to the cross: “...I pray not for the world, but for them which thou (the Father) hast given me; for they are thine.”

John 4 tells the story of the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at the well. Now, as I trust that God has assembled His word exactly as He intended, I do not believe that this story immediately follows John 3 by mere coincidence. In Chapter 4, John is continuing to teach that Jesus is the savior of the world, and not the Jews alone. The Savior “must needs go through Samaria.” In Sychar, He encounters the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, and asks her for a drink of water. She is surprised, and asks Jesus “How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? For the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.” Then Jesus gradually reveals the gospel to her, and that He is the Messiah, of whom she has heard. She believes and is saved.

Now, before Jesus encountered the woman, His disciples had gone for food, and returned just in time to see the end of their conversation. Even His disciples were shocked to see Him with a Samaritan woman. “They marvelled that He talked with the woman: yet no man said, What seekest thou? or Why talkest thou with her?” They were essentially left speechless by what they saw. (Scripture doesn’t reveal whether they heard Jesus tell her that He was the Messiah.) But, rather than satisfying their curiosity, they changed the subject to food. Jesus then says “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.” As Jesus and His disciples sat in Samaria, He tells the disciples to “Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.” (The suggestion is that He is

referring to a harvest of Samaritan, and other non-Jewish peoples.) He tells the disciples that they will reap where others have labored and sowed before them. In the meantime, as saved people want to do, the woman had witnessed to the Samaritan men, and they came to Jesus. He stayed for two days teaching the Samaritans, and “many more believed because of his own word; and said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.” Christ is the savior of the Samaritans, too.

The popular view held in this century that “the world” refers to all mankind in all ages springs from several ideas, including but not limited to the following:

1. a presupposition that God is love and loves everyone equally (i.e., no respecter of persons);
2. erroneous dispensationalist (i.e., Scofield) teaching that the God of the Old Testament was a God of wrath and judgement, but the God of the New Testament is a God of grace in the present “church” age; and,
3. a belief that to suggest that He didn’t die for all mankind would somehow limit the sufficiency of Jesus’s work on the cross and demean His atoning sacrifice.

A doctrine of universal atonement has some serious scriptural problems. The Bible teaches that the atonement of Christ is substitutionary: Jesus stands in the place of the sinner for whom He atones. The Old Testament sacrifices were also substitutionary, and were a figure of the atonement of Jesus. This, in the true sense, is the basis for Jesus being our personal savior. As seen in the following verses, Jesus takes your place.

Isa 53:4-6

4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (We will address the meaning of “all” in this passage another time.)

In the popular view, Jesus substitutes for everyone, but everyone doesn't get saved. You have to ask how can they go to Hell if Jesus has already taken their punishment? Would the Father exact punishment twice? Did the atonement really accomplish anything or was it a symbolic act? In the passage from Isaiah above, God very clear states that Jesus really atones for sinners, specifically, and not just for sin in general or sin symbolically. "Surely, He hath borne our griefs...."

God also makes it clear that only a certain group, spiritual Israel, "the sheep", are saved. In John 6, Jesus says "all that the Father giveth me shall come unto me", and "this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing.." These verses show that God never intended to save everyone, but those He intended to save were foreknown (foreloved), predestined, called, justified, and glorified (Romans 8:30). Remember that justification is based on the atonement for sin, where in, our sin was accounted to Jesus and His righteousness was accounted to us. This "legal" transaction justifies a person and makes them right with God. Thus, if a soul is atoned for, that soul is made right, justified, with God. Note that the transaction is between the Father and Jesus, but pertains to our debt. The efficacy (i.e., that it accomplishes its purpose) of His work on the cross does not depend at all on our faith in what He did for us. For example, if I pay your Christmas bills, your creditors don't care whether you believe I did it, and I wouldn't care whether you believed it either. The debt is paid, period. Similarly, the atonement doesn't hinge on belief. But, if Christ died for you, you will believe it. The Holy Spirit will give you the belief needed to be one of the "whosoever," and you will live for the Lord.

In John 10, Jesus says "I am the door of the sheep", "I lay down my life for the sheep", and, "ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep." Jesus says that the ability to believe rests on whether the person is a sheep. He did not say "ye are not of my sheep, because ye believe not." I am not ready to say that God mis-spoke. I know that this is a subtle distinction, but it is an important distinction because the popular view of the atonement makes belief the condition for receiving atonement. These verses say that you believe because you are a sheep and that Jesus died for the sheep. You believe because you have been atoned, not vice versa.

Another scriptural difficulty with a universal atonement is that Jesus does not "see the travail of His soul" and is not "satisfied" as Isaiah 53:10,11 promises. God cannot lie. "He shall see His seed." We have seen that all that the Father gives Him shall come to Him and He shall lose none of them. Those verses clearly state that He will be satisfied. How can Jesus be satisfied by dying for people only to see them reject Him and go to hell? If all mankind is His seed, how will He see them

all in a saving way? Would the Father be so cruel to the Son? One might say that the Father gave the Son all who He foresaw would believe. But this reasoning again makes belief a meritorious work, which is unbiblical. This leads us to another concern that relates to the Trinity.

A doctrine of universal atonement also produces a conflict (disagreement) within the Trinity. We know that “The Lord our God is one.” Although we must speak of three personalities because we cannot comprehend the unsearchable reality of God, we know that the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit are of one eternal, harmonious mind. Their purposes must be identical. That being a truth, a universal atonement would have the Son atone for more souls than the Father has given Him, which would create a conflict in the Godhead. As the prior verses quoted show, the Father did not give the Son everyone. Wouldn’t perfect harmony require that the objects of God’s redemptive plan be the same for each Person of the Trinity? Can the Son desire to save more souls than the Father? No, because the Son has come to do the will of the Father. Would the Holy Spirit fail to apply the blood to all that the Son had purchased? No, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. In my weak mind, the suggestion of a disagreement in the Godhead, alone, is sufficient evidence to disprove a universal atonement, for I can see no conflict in God.

Point 3: A condition set forth

In John 3:16, belief in Jesus is the condition for salvation. Great care must be taken here because it appears as if God is requiring a work from us to be saved. But, the Bible says that salvation is not of works so that no one can boast. Also, one might quickly conclude that if the condition is belief, we must by nature have the ability to believe. But, accountability is never proof of ability. Do you think that when Jesus says “be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” or “go and sin no more” He believes that we can do it? In fact, He knows that we can’t be perfect, or go and sin no more. I suggest to you that He cannot say otherwise because to do so would be inconsistent with His perfection. Since the fall, God has throughout history placed impossible demands on His people. Even so, whenever the Lord makes a condition, we are always responsible, but not always able. Now, let us look at “belief.”

The Greek words for “believe”, and “faith” are “pisteuo” and “pistis,” respectively. These both mean trust or rely upon. So, the kind of belief required in John 3:16 is complete trust in Jesus. This is not just an intellectual knowledge. It is a faith that bears good fruit, as John 3:21 points out. “But he that doeth truth cometh to the

light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.” From where does such faith come?

Point 4: The ground of faith and belief

Where does belief in Jesus come from? Does it originate in us or does God work it in us? If God left us alone, could we ever believe? Inquiring minds want to know! The answer is in John 3. Jesus revealed to Nicodemus the initial condition for salvation, as it occurs in time. (I state it this way because election occurred before time began, and that would be the true initial condition.)

Being born of the Spirit is the first condition:

John 3:3

3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

I think that we would all agree that seeing the kingdom of God refers to salvation. If so, then a person must be born again of the Spirit to be saved. Then Jesus uses the wind, metaphorically, to describe the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit in the new birth, which is also called regeneration.

John 3:7-12

7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.

8 The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be?

10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?

11 Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness.

12 If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?

The wind blows where it may; we can't control it, send it, or summon it. Likewise, we can't see the Spirit; but, we can see His effects: a lively faith wrought in the person. The condition of John 3:3 must be met before the condition of John 3:16-17 can be met. Other verses confirm that our faith is from God and not of ourselves.

Eph 2:8-9

8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

John 3:27

27 John (the Baptist) answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.

John 6:63

63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

John 6:44

44 No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

Thus, we see that faith is God's working in us both to will and to do according to His good pleasure. As believers, we are His workmanship, not our own workmanship. God provides by grace the faith needed to meet the condition for salvation. Without the regenerating work of the Spirit, we could not believe. We could not be one of the "whosoever" of John 3:16.

In summary, we see that John 3:16, when examined in the context of John 3, John 4, and John's writings as a whole, tells us that God's saving love extends, not only to the Jews, but Gentiles also. God has determined to save a people, spiritual Israel, from the whole world by the regenerating, faith-giving, power of the Holy Spirit and the atoning work of Jesus applied to those whom the Father had given Him (and the Spirit). John uses "the world" several times in his Gospel, epistles, and apocalypse. If you have time, look at 1 John 2:2. Once again, John is only distinguishing Jew and Gentile, rather than saying that Jesus died for the sins of all humanity.

Omniscience is not within our grasp, nor can we aspire to it. Even so, let us with all our strength pursue the truth in His Word as God sees fit reveal it, remembering always that "Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifyeth."