

12. THE GREATEST VERSE IN THE BIBLE (3:16)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. John 3:16 is probably the most well-known verse in the Bible. If this were the only verse you had, what would you know about God and salvation?

John 3:16 is considered often to be the greatest verse in the Bible, and has been described as the Gospel in a nutshell. From road signs to t-shirts, from books to tattoos, some form of this verse or references to it appear all over the place. Most Christians, and indeed many non-Christians, can quote this verse verbatim at the drop of a hat.

Many professing Christians understand this verse, but many, I believe, fail to think through its implications and truly grasp its beauty. For example, who is God? Who is the Son? Why did God give His Son for us? And what does it mean to perish or to have everlasting life? We will explore these and several other questions as we go.

We will consider this verse by looking at the seven great wonders it contains:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| • <i>For God</i> | The Authority |
| • <i>So loved</i> | The Motive |
| • <i>The world</i> | The Recipient |
| • <i>That He gave His only Son</i> | The Gift |
| • <i>That whoever believes in Him</i> | The Offer |
| • <i>Should not perish</i> | The Escape |
| • <i>But have eternal life</i> | The Possession |

THE AUTHORITY – FOR GOD

Whenever you see the words “*therefore*” or “*for*”, you must always ask the question, “What is the *therefore* (for), there for?”. These words indicate that what follows them is grounded in what precedes them – providing additional information of what is being described. In other words, you need to understand the context and meaning of verses that precede it before you can begin to interpret those that follow. In this case, verses 1 to 15 (Note: we must apply this same rule to the following words; “*so*”, “*thus*”, “*then*”, “*consequently*”, “*hence*”, “*since*”, and “*accordingly*”; or any causes that contain these words – known as resultant clauses).

In context, verse 16 is connected to verses 14 and 15 that refer to the account of the bronze serpent raised up in the wilderness in Numbers 21. Jesus is providing more information on His being lifted up on the cross. As we shall see, it emphasises God’s work throughout the born again process and that the only response on man’s part is that of believing.

But who is God? We use the name/term so readily, but who is He?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. The modern world has many definitions and descriptions for God. Most are based on a humanistic philosophy and describe a god of man's imagination and selfish desires. What are some of the ways that you have heard God being describes as in conversations with others, or in the media?
2. If you were to describe God to someone, how would you describe Him?

Did you know: Over the millennia, over 250 gods and demigods have been worshipped or venerated across the African continent. In China, over 170. By the Australian Aborigines, 93 gods and goddesses. And what about the Greeks? No fewer than 540 gods, goddesses and demigods have been worshipped. But that number falls short of the Native American Indians who worshipped 711 gods, heroes or personified facets of nature. And those figures do not take into account the things that people worship on a daily basis that are not usually considered gods but merely idols, such as money or fame.

Although there are several attributes of God given in the Bible, there are three that are critical when it comes to understanding salvation:

1. **God is One:** There is only one God, and He is one, united within Himself. He is single in mind, emotions and purpose. This truth is stated repeatedly throughout the scriptures, but its clearest statement is found in the first and greatest commandment (cf. Deut. 6:4-5; Mark 12:29-30). Because there is only one God, we should not divide our love between him and any other god. Moreover, because God is one, united in himself, we should love him undividedly, with all of our being. That there is only one God and there is no other follows logically from His self-existence and creatorhood. (cf. 1 Cor. 8:5-6 cp. Isa. 40:21-28; 44:24; 45:18; Jer. 10:6-16). God's oneness has always been critical to His relationships with human beings (cf. Isa. 40:17-25).
2. **Creator:** The fact that God is the creator of all is attested to throughout Scripture (e.g. Gen. 1:1; Neh. 9:6; Psa. 8:3-8; John 1:3; Acts 17:26-28; Rom. 1:19-20; Col. 1:16; etc.). All of this points to being far superior and more powerful than anyone else could ever be. Whatever you may think about creation, the implications that all is created by God are huge. It means that man is not the ultimate being. It means that man, the earth, the universe, and anything else that one can imagine existing, seen or unseen (cf. Col. 1:16) sprang from the mind of someone else. It means too that man did not come about by some random chance and has no purpose, but was created. Everyone is a result of an idea, plan, and action of God. This means that man is not as free as he would like to think. Because God is our creator, He has the right to tell us how to live.
3. **Holy:** Within the creation account, and indeed throughout the rest of the Bible, God's holiness is the one attribute that is taught and repeated more than any other (e.g. Exo. 34:6-7; Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). In Isaiah 6 specifically, the Hebrew indicates that God's holiness is being declared in the angels' worship for eternity – the angels never stop singing about it. This is significant. For all etern-

ity the angels are declaring God's holiness. Not His love. Not His mercy. Nor His grace. The three things man tends to focus on, but rather His holiness.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Why is what a person believes about God important? In what ways do these beliefs shape other areas of a person's life?
2. How does a biblical understanding of God's attributes as Creator and holy impact the way that you perceive yourself and other people?

THE MOTIVE – SO LOVED

I need to state briefly that the word "so" used here does not refer to the amount of love God had for the world, as if to say, "God loved the world this much". Rather it refers to the way He loved the world, which the rest of the verse then describes.

Why did God send His Son to die to save sinners? We are given no other reason than this – love (see also Eph. 1:5). But not just with any love. For the Greek word for "love" that John uses here is that all familiar word, *Agapé*. This is God's self-giving love. This is the love that God has for you despite what you may say or do. Even if you never love Him back, He still loves you. And it is a love that cost His Son's life. God loved us by giving His most treasured possession. The gift of His Son, who died on the cross for you. We must not forget that Jesus was also willing to lay down His life (John 10:15-18), and so shared the love that the Father had.

John Murray stated it so well when he writes, "Love so amazing we cannot scale its heights nor fathom its depths".⁶³

THE RECIPIENT – THE WORLD

What is the world? Or rather, who is the world? Quite simply, in context, the world is mankind. It is every person who ever has, and ever will, live on this planet.

But there's a problem. Man is not holy like God (cf. Rom. 3:10b-12, 23). The truth is that we have all sinned, and no-one is even looking for God. If anything, man is running in the opposite direction away from Him. This gives one a sense of hopelessness. A feeling that there is no point in living and nothing to look forward to.

Putting this into context, the Jews were familiar with the fact that God loved His chosen nation, Israel. However, here God's love is not restricted to them alone, but includes all of humanity. But what makes this so amazing is not that God loves the world that is so big and includes so many people, but because the world is so evil and hostile towards God (cf. Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10). This love is not expressed only to God's friends, but to His enemies also (cp. John 15:13).⁶⁴

⁶³ Quoted in Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*. Evangelical Press, p143.

⁶⁴ Carson, pp204-205.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Which is more difficult: To believe that God loves others, or to believe that God loves you? Why is that?

THE GIFT – THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON

Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel perform sacrifices for forgiveness. However, as the author of the book of Hebrews tells us, no animal sacrifice or shed blood of an innocent bull or goat, is able to remove sin (10:1-4). Instead, those sacrifices serve as a reminder of the severity of sin. They were a shadow, or a sign, pointing to something greater. And as the writer of Hebrews goes on to explain, that better way is Jesus who had to come and die for sin to be dealt with.

John uses the word “*gave*” in two senses here: God gave the Son by sending Him into the world, but He also gave Him on the cross. What also stands out in this verse is that the cross shows us love of the Father, as opposed to the love of the Son as expressed in Galatians 2:20.⁶⁵ Although Jesus does willingly lay down His life, the emphasis is that Jesus is God’s gift to the fallen world. This is truly amazing in that the one to whom the debt is owed is also the One who gives the fee to pay that debt – He does not just write it off, nor does Jesus step in on His own accord. Instead of giving man what man deserves – death – He gives man a way out.

His Only Son, or His Only Begotten Son

NOTE: The content in this section may be a little technical, but is included for those who wonder where the word begotten comes from in some translations.

Some translations include the word “*begotten*” to describe Jesus’ relationship to the Father (e.g. the KJV, NKJV, and NASB), while others, including the ESV, leave the word out. Some people use this as a case against the modern translations of leaving out certain words or verses that are important to the text. But is this the case?

The original Greek adjective *monogene* in John 3:16 and its grammatical case variants are all derived from the root words *monos*, which means “alone” or “solitary”, and *genos*, which means “type” or “kind”. This adjective, therefore, literally means “alone type” or “solitary kind”, simplified as “unique” or “only”. When applied to Jesus (cf. 1:18; 3:16, 18) it is used to describe Him as the “unique” or “only” Son of God the Father.

But can *monogene* and its variants be translated as “only begotten” to describe Jesus as the “only begotten Son” of God the Father? To answer this question it is helpful to look at how the same word is used elsewhere in the New Testament. Hebrews 11:17 describes Isaac as Abraham’s *monogene*. Since Abraham also fathered (i.e. begot) other children (i.e. Ishmael, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah – Gen. 25:2), it would be incorrect to say that Isaac was his “only begotten” son. Isaac, therefore,

65 Morris, Leon. 1995. *The Gospel According to John*. NICNT. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

is not Abraham's "only begotten son" but his "unique son" when compared to Abraham's other sons, in the sense that he was the one of God's "covenant" (Gen.s 17:19).

Where then does the word "begotten" come from? There are generally two recognised sources:

1. Some ancient translators erroneously thought that the root of the second part of *monogene* was *gennao* which means "to beget" rather than *genos*, meaning "type" or "kind". English words such as genesis, generate, and genealogy derive from *gennao*. However, if *gennao* was the root word, an additional "n" would need to be added to read *monogenNe*.⁶⁶
2. In AD 382, Jerome went to Rome to revise the Latin translation of the Bible. He changed the Latin word *unicus* (only) in John 1:14, 1:18, 3:16, and 3:18 to *unigenitum* (only begotten). This change was motivated by the theological debate of the time with Arianism over the deity of Christ. This Latin translation was later used in the translation of the King James Bible, and so this change was transferred to the English. In trying to deal with a theological and political problem, linguistic accuracy was compromised.⁶⁷

THE OFFER – THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM

Whoever refers to all people regardless of age, gender, social status, financial position, skin colour, or education. It refers to all sinners, everywhere. But what is truly amazing here is that salvation and forgiveness based of accepting something, not doing something.⁶⁸ This is because God does not save people only once they have cleaned up their lives or become more holy or righteous before He saves them. No, He saves you, whoever you are, just as you are, and changes them to become who He desires them to be.

This truth is opposite to every other faith system, as they all base salvation on works or performing certain rituals. How many good works would one have to perform to make it? How clean would one have to become? And how long would it take one to accomplish everything? If this were how one is saved, the truly scary and demotivating thought is, what if one were to stand before God on judgement day and all one's deeds were counted and one is just one deed short, and so you does not make it. How devastating and what a waste of a life it would be.

But consider the criminal on the cross in Luke 24 to whom Jesus says, "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise*" (v43). What a scandal. This man has lived his whole life in sin. He has never been baptised. He never ran a soup kitchen. Has probably never tithed a cent in his life. He does not belong to a church and has no trace of goodness in him. Yet the dying criminal is given the promise of eternal life on the basis of only one thing, his faith in Jesus Christ who pays for the criminal's sin with His own blood on the cross next to him. Nothing more, nothing less.

66 Fumularo, Franco. 2017. *Words Matter: Linguistic, Historical and Theological Issues with the Term "Begotten"*. Journal of Unification Studies, vol18, pp121-138.

67 For more information on this issue, read Fumularo's article.

68 Tenney, Merrill C. 1981. *The Gospel of John*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9, edited by Frank E. Gaebelien. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, p50.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. How does the fact that only belief is required and not works affect how you approach God with your sin?
2. If good works are not needed to be saved, where then do they fit in the Christian life?

THE ESCAPE – SHALL NOT PERISH

The verb “*perish*” depicts the opposite of eternal life that follows. It is important to remember here that John does not use the word “*perish*” to mean physical death only. If that were the case then it would stand to reason that the phrase “*eternal life*” would only mean an immortal physical life. Its use here implies that those without God are forever without hope and alienated from God’s grace. Instead their future is the death that they deserve (cf. Rom. 6:23), and their only escape is belief in the Son of God.

We will not look at this phrase specifically, but rather consider its positive opposite, eternal life, for the perished state is everything that is the opposite of eternal life.

THE POSSESSION – BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

The Gospel offers only two options: to believe or to perish – there is no middle road. Eternal life, which is accepted by believing, is a gift of God and brings with it the fullest blessings God can bestow.⁶⁹

The result of belief is that one receives eternal life. One is freed from condemnation and lives in a relationship of total honesty with God, for he does not fear having his real self exposed. “Eternal”, the new life God gives, does not merely refer to the duration of existence but also to the quality of life. It can never be exhausted in any measurable span of time, but it also includes a totally new and absolute quality of life. The believer become immortal, free from all condemnation and the presence of sin, experiencing the grace of God for all eternity, and fully reconciled with God.⁷⁰

Read Revelation 21: This chapter paints a glorious picture of what eternity will be like for those who are saved. It is a city made of the finest stones, jewels, and precious metals imaginable. The things that we value in this life will pale in comparison to what heaven will be like. Even the gold we treasure here on earth, will be used to pave the roads under our feet. We also learn that in heaven there will be no more tears, pain or sickness (cp. Eze. 24). In fact, God Himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. What a great time and place to look forward to.

But even greater than the treasures and personal freedom we will experience, the greatest treasure will be God Himself. This is something to truly look forward to.

69 Tenney, p50.

70 Tenney, p50.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Based on John 3:16, try to summarise the Gospel in as few sentences as possible without using any Christian clichés.
2. Ultimately the Gospel is not something that we are to keep to ourselves, but we are to share it with others. Who is God calling you to share the Gospel with?
3. The only question left to answer is, do you believe?