

John 3:16

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[0 : 00] Now, for a short while this morning, I'd like us to turn back to the chapter that we read, John chapter 3.

John chapter 3, and we'll read again at verse 16.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. And in particular, I want us to look at the words at the very start.

For God so loved the world. Now, I want us to start this morning by asking a question.

[1 : 14] And I want us to ask, what is the hardest thing to believe in the Bible? There's loads of different things in the Bible. It covers many, many generations of history, and it recounts all sorts of different events.

But of all these things, what's the hardest thing to believe that we find in the Bible? Well, some people would obviously, would straightaway say, well, the hardest thing to believe is the idea that God created the world.

And as we know, there are so many people who use this, the evidence of science and the analysis of these things as a great evidence or a great proof that God didn't create the world.

And we know from many secular sources that that sort of argument is made. And the idea of the biblical account of creation, for so many people, they think, well, we just can't believe that.

That's the hardest thing to believe. Well, I don't think for a minute that that's the hardest thing to believe in the Bible. And when you look, if you even want to take it from a scientific point of view, the scientific evidence points us, in a way people will say conclusively, to the fact that the world did indeed have a beginning.

[2 : 30] The world did start. It hasn't been here since forever. There was a beginning, which ties in with exactly what the Bible says. And whether you look at the tiniest details of the DNA of genes and cells, I'm no expert on these things.

But if you look at all these things, the tiniest particles to the great expanses of heaven, the universe in all its glory, these things all show elements of design.

They all point towards a hand that created them. So the idea that God created the world is not the hardest thing to believe. People might say, well, okay, that's fine.

But what about the flood? The idea of Noah and the flood, that really, that seems a bit far-fetched. Maybe that's the hardest thing in the world to believe. But again, I would say, no, I don't think that's the hardest thing at all to believe.

If you accept the fact that God can create the world, then you should have no trouble accepting the fact that the events of Genesis, chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, took place as well.

[3 : 40] And even if you look recently, look at what happened in the Philippines. It reminds you of what nature can do. And in a way, it almost seems unbelievable, unexpected, what powers and forces and changes can happen in the natural realm, almost in the blink of an eye.

So that's not our answer either. That's not the hardest thing to believe. Okay, what if we go to the New Testament? Maybe we say, well, maybe the miracles of Jesus, that's got to be the hardest thing to believe.

And again, people reject the idea that the miraculous happened. They think, these things don't happen now. People don't walk on water now. Jesus didn't walk on water back then.

People think, that can't have been happened. That can't have happened. But again, I don't think for a minute that that's the hardest thing to believe in the Bible. On the one hand, Jesus is the Son of God. It's through Him that everything was created.

Of course, He can perform these miracles. But on the other hand, even from a historical perspective, you have to remember that the New Testament accounts were written within the lifetime of eyewitnesses to these events.

[4 : 48] And that's really, really important. Because if John and Luke and Matthew had written all of these things, when they did, between 60 and 90 AD, that kind of period, there was people still alive then who were around Jesus and saw Jesus.

And they could easily have said, that didn't happen. If in 20 years' time you read a story in the newspaper that said, on the 17th of November, 2013, the River Don turned pink and started bubbling, you would say, that didn't happen.

I was there. And you would be able to prove that wrong. You would be an eyewitness to the event that that did not happen. And it's the same as true of the New Testament Scriptures. Eyewitnesses were alive when all these things were written down.

And nobody objected. Nobody said these things didn't happen. If anything, the historical evidence just backs up that these things did happen. So, miracles of Jesus, that's not the hardest thing either, I don't think.

Finally, what if we said, Jesus' death and resurrection? Surely we can't believe that. Well, again, you look, if you want something, if you want to look at a historical event and to look at the evidence to take place, the evidence that backs up whether that happened, nothing, I don't think, has more evidence from that period than the fact that Jesus was crucified and that the tomb was empty.

[6 : 16] The witnesses, the evidence is overwhelming that these things actually took place. So, none of these things, creation, flood, miracles, Jesus' death and resurrection, these are not the hardest thing to believe in the Bible.

So, what is the hardest thing to believe in the Bible? Well, I think the hardest thing to believe in the Bible is to believe that God loves you.

I think that's the hardest thing to believe. John 3.16 talks about love.

And in this little phrase that we're going to look at at the start of this verse, we have three absolutely astonishing words. And I want us just to spend a few minutes this morning looking at each of these astonishing words.

They are absolutely amazing words. The first word I want us to look at is world, the world. It says, God so loved the world.

[7 : 25] And you might think to yourself, well, why is that astonishing? What's astonishing about saying the world? Well, it is really, really astonishing. And why is that? Well, first we have to ask ourselves, what does that mean?

What does it mean when it says here, God so loved the world? Is it just talking about nature? Is it talking about the created realm? Well, no, because it's talking about, even just a few words later, it talks about believing.

The created realm doesn't believe. Trees don't believe. Mountains don't believe. It's not talking about creation as such, the world in the geographical sense. It's talking about people.

It's people who believe. So, in that case, well, does that just mean the good people? Is the world meaning the way the world should be, the good aspects of the world?

Well, it's not referring to that. That's not what this word is being used for. Does it mean just the Jews only? Well, again, it doesn't mean just the Jews only, because Jesus was speaking to a Jew at the time, speaking to Nicodemus, and if he meant Jews only, he would have said Jews only.

[8 : 32] He would have said Israel, or he would have said you and your people, or the descendants of Jacob, or one of these many phrases that we hear. He wasn't referring to Jews only, nor was he referring just to the church.

He says the world. And when he says that, he is meaning every single human being that has ever lived. Every single person who has ever lived.

He is deliberately using this word to make sure that there are no hidden restrictions. He's not saying world and meaning something else.

He says world, and he means world. Every single human being who has ever lived. But it's not enough to say that.

We haven't quite got it. It's not enough just to say every human being. We have to say every sinful human being. The world is referring to every sinful human being.

[9 : 38] And when you see this word, the world, it's actually been used in a negative sense. The world, the biblical picture of the world, is that the world is in a bad state.

The world is in a bad state. We sang about that in Psalm 14, from verse 2, And so when it's talking about the world in John 3, 16, it's talking about the world in a state that has been ruined, and that has been spoiled and corrupted.

And that reminds us about the biblical doctrine of sin. The Bible teaches us about sin, and that sin has affected the world. Every aspect of the world and every aspect of every human being has been affected.

That's what we call total depravity. Every aspect of our nature has been affected and spoiled by sin. So when it says world in John 3, 16, it's talking about something totally unlovely. Something unlovely. And so in these few words we have here, God so loved the world, you've got a huge contrast being made.

[11 : 07] Because on the one hand, you have God in all his glory, in all his majesty, in all his wonder, and God, as we know, we just cannot even come close to describing his majesty.

In Isaiah chapter 6, verse 1 to 3, we get a wee tiny glimpse of it. Isaiah says that in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings. With two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, with two he flew, and one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts.

The whole earth is full of his glory. So God, as we know, is just awesome and amazing in his majesty, his wonder, and his holiness.

God is way, way up. And the world is in complete contrast to that. The world is way down. The world is broken and damaged.

[12 : 14] So in this little phrase, we have a lovely, lovely God and a really unlovely world. And this is why it's really hard to believe that God loves us.

It's really hard to really, really believe it because when we look at ourselves, we see faults and we see failings. And we see that we just don't match up to what God's standards are.

And even Isaiah felt exactly the same. After he saw God, what was his reaction? He said, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. And that's a message that we get throughout the Bible. The fact that man, when he is compared to God, is just so small and so insignificant and so tiny.

Psalm 144, O Lord, what is man that you regard him? O the son of man that you think of him. Man is like a breath. His days are like a passing shadow.

[13 : 24] And when we look at how sin came into the world and how it affected man, we see that one of the instant effects was that man became ashamed. What did Adam do after he had sinned?

He hid. I heard your voice. I heard the sound of you in the garden. And I was afraid because I was naked. And I hid myself. Man immediately became ashamed of himself.

Immediately conscious of his faults. And humanity, ever since, has this tendency and this urge to think negatively. So often we look at ourselves and we just, we see faults, we get frustrated, and we know that all around us people struggle with low self-esteem, people struggle with depression, people get very, very frustrated with the way that they are.

they are aware of their faults. This word, world, is astonishing. Because it's talking about the world as it is.

With all its faults and all its failings. Because of that, it can be really hard, really hard, to believe that God loves us.

[14 : 41] So like I said, John 3.16 creates this huge contrast. In the space of five words, God and the world.

And there couldn't be a bigger gap or distance between the two. And you think, when you think of these things, God and his glory and the world and his sinfulness, you think, well, any link between the two of them is impossible.

How can there be any connection between the two of them? But that's not what John 3.16 is saying. John 3.16 says there is a link between the two of them.

And what is that link? Well, look at the words. You've got five words there. God at the start, world at the end. The link is in the middle. Loved.

And this is the second astonishing word that I want us to look at. God and the world are linked by love. Now, when it comes to talking about love, the Bible doesn't hold back.

[15:50] The Bible sets love as the greatest attribute that anyone can have. We're reminded of that in 1 Corinthians 13.13.

Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. But the greatest of these is love. So, the greatest characteristic that anyone can have towards another is love.

That is as good as it gets. That is the pinnacle. Love is at the very, very, very top. And it's love that God has for the world.

And that is just amazing. It's absolutely amazing that this is the word that's being used. It's not saying God considered the world, God had pity on the world.

All these things, yes, are good, but the best thing of all is love. And that's what it says. God loved the world. Absolutely amazing that this word is being used.

[16:53] But when we think about this phrase, God loved the world, there's two mistakes that we have to avoid and we have to just be clear about them before we go any further. Two mistakes.

The first mistake to make is that John 3.16 is not talking, it's not talking about universalism. It's not saying that everybody is saved automatically. It doesn't say, God so loved the world, therefore, everybody's saved like that.

It's not saying that and I'm sure, I know that you know that. And even just a couple of words later, it says, those who believe in him, even John 3.16 places the need for faith on every one of us.

We must believe. It's not not talking about universalism. That's a mistake we must avoid. But there's another mistake that we can make as well and that's to think that John 3.16 is just talking about Christians.

Christians. When John 3.16 says, God so loved the world, it's a mistake to say that that actually says God so loved Christians.

[18:00] It's not what it's saying. It's not what it's saying. And there's a remarkable, remarkable passage in Jeremiah that emphasizes and confirms that to us.

In Jeremiah chapter 48, it talks about Moab. Now Moab was one of the neighboring nations to Israel and they caused them a lot of bother. They were enemies and they were aggressive and they were not helpful neighbors at all.

They opposed God. They were enemies. And in the end, God had no alternative but to punish them. These were not people of Israel. They were a foreign nation and they were enemies.

And Jeremiah 48, verse 42, pronounces judgment on them. It says, Moab shall be destroyed and no longer be a people because he magnified himself against the Lord.

Their condemnation is clear and that's what happened. That is what happened. But at the same time, the very same chapter has these words in it.

[19:07] Verse 31, God says, I wail for Moab. I cry out for all of Moab. For the men of Kir Haraseth I mourn.

And then further on down in verse 36, it says, Therefore my heart moans for Moab like a flute. My heart moans like a flute for the men of Kir Haraseth.

God mourned the judgment that he had to pronounce on Moab. God cared for them. God loved them. But they rebelled against him and he had to judge them.

And so it shows that God has a love for the world. Yes, God has a particular and a special love for his people. But God loves the world. There are two things that are absolutely true and we must hold to them both.

The world is sinful. It's lost. Without Christ it will be condemned. That is true. But what is also true is that the world is loved by God.

[20:16] That very same world is loved by God. And I want us to notice four things about this love that we have in John 3.16. First of all, I want us to notice the direction of this love.

It's important to notice that. Notice, it doesn't say the world so loved God, therefore God reacted. God so loved the world.

And this world is openly hostile to God. And the verses around this passage remind us of that. That it says, verse 19, light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light.

Same emphasis is made just a little bit further back in John chapter 1. He came to his own, but his own did not receive him.

The world openly rejects God. The world does not love God back. The direction of the love in John 3.16 is one way.

[21 : 23] It is from God to the world. So, we must notice the direction. Secondly, we must notice the reason or the source behind this love.

Again, the little words in the Bible are all very important. You would think that it would maybe say something like, God loves the world because, because of this or because of that.

That's the way that we would tend to think. But here it says, for God so loved the world. That word for is really important. It's what you'd call a causal connector.

It's expressing cause. It's like the word because. We could translate it because. Because God loved the world. And it's reminding us that the source of this love, the starting point for this love, is God. God is love. And that's where this love comes from. And it reminds us that this love is totally unearned, totally undeserved.

[22 : 27] God. Now, we don't work like that and we don't think like that. We love something because of some sort of loveliness in the object.

Maybe some of us love going, going hill walking in the Cairngorms because they're beautiful. It's lovely there and that's why we love it. Maybe some of us love going to visit some of the nice buildings around here or something like that or going to look at nice art.

It's all because of a loveliness in the object. That's what stirs up love in us but that's not how God works. God loves the world because of who He is not because of who we are.

We love because He loved us first and it reminds us of something amazing. We don't have to persuade God to love us. We don't have to convince Him to love us.

We don't even have to ask Him to love us. It's amazing. God is the source. He's the reason behind this love. But also we have to notice that this love leads to action.

[23 : 37] When we're talking about God's love we're not talking about something remote and distant, something abstract, some theoretical, theological principle. We're talking about something that is demonstrated in action.

God's love prompts Him to do something, prompts Him to act to save His people and of course John 3.16 tells us what He did.

He gave His only Son. God acts on behalf of His people. And if we look around, just even at the few verses around John 3.16 it describes all sorts of actions that took place as a result of this love.

If you go back to verse 13 it says, no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven or the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. Jesus descended down from heaven.

He did something. He was in heaven and He came to the earth. That was an action, an activity and that was prompted by the love of God. It led to action.

[24 : 39] Verse 14 talks about the same sort of thing. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. Again, that's talking about the cross, Jesus going physically, doing something, going to the cross, leading to action.

God's love leads to action. And it just, again, reminds us of how amazing it is that God has done all this because this world, as we said, it's not lovely.

This world shouldn't matter. God doesn't need the world. He doesn't need us. He is completely sufficient and complete in and of Himself.

We shouldn't matter. The Son of God shouldn't have had to descend and He shouldn't have had to have been lifted up like the serpent was lifted up. He shouldn't have had to have done all that.

And eternal life and salvation shouldn't be an option for any of us. But it is. And that's all because of the love of God.

[25 : 50] All because of God's love. It led to action. But fourthly, God's love requires a response.

God's love must be responded to. Because when you think about it, love is only ever perfected if it's mutual.

And that's true even in our own experience. I remember when I was young, I fell in love with my wife long before I knew if she liked, if she loved me or even if she even knew who I was.

Thankfully, by some miracle, she loved me back. But if she hadn't, my love for her would have been incomplete, it would have been frustrated, it would have been disappointed, it wouldn't have been perfected.

God's love needs to be responded to. And that's why we can say that the love that God has for His people, for those who believe in Him, is deeper and stronger.

[27 : 02] It's a greater love because these people have responded as they should. Every one of us who puts our trust in Jesus, we have responded as we should to God's love. And that, in a way, perfects the love.

It makes it what it should be. It makes it a relationship between God, our Father, and we, His children. And it just reminds us that we must, must respond to this love.

It goes back to what we were saying about John 3, 16, is not teaching universal salvation. It's teaching that salvation is offered on the basis of God's love, but it must be responded to.

We must believe. You must believe. We must respond to God's love. love. Now, what does all this mean for us today?

We said this, this word love is absolutely astonishing. It's an amazing word. What does it mean for us today? you? Well, as I was saying to the children, I've hardly been to this church before.

[28 : 07] I've never preached here, and most of you, I don't know very well at all. But there's one thing I know about you. You are loved by God.

Every one of you. You are loved by God. Do you believe that? Do you believe that?

Because it's hard to believe. I think it's the hardest thing in the Bible to believe that God actually loves you.

But John 3, 16, not me, the Bible is telling you that right now, God loves you.

That is amazing. This word, loved, is an absolutely astonishing word. And I want you all to leave here knowing that you are loved by God.

[29 : 13] I want you to leave here believing that and to be aware of it as you live your lives. I want you to know that but you might state away, ask yourself the question, well, how can I know?

How can I know that God loves me? Well, that brings us to our third and our final astonishing word. And it's probably the most astonishing of them all. It's a tiny little word, so. God so loved the world. Now, we need to understand what this word is saying because in the original language, this word, so, literally translated, it's the word, thus. And we don't tend to use the word, thus, in English, but that's what the word is.

And thus means like in this way. So, you could accurately translate John 3, 16 by saying, for God in this way loved the world that he gave his son.

[30 : 25] God loved the world in this way, in this way, what way? In that he gave his one and only son. God has demonstrated his love in giving his own son.

That's what John 3, 16 is saying. This word, so, is telling us that when God demonstrated his love, he did it by sending his son.

And it reminds us that God's love costs him. It costs him the most precious possession that he has, his one and only son, his dear, precious, precious child, Jesus, who has been in perfect fellowship with the Father for all eternity, between whom there is a bond and a love that we could never even come close to describing.

Father and son united in a love that is deeper than you or I will ever know. The son who is so, so, so precious to the Father, and he gave him.

God's love costs. God's love is absolutely immeasurable. God's love is God's love. I can't sum that up well.

[31 : 46] I can't describe that, but the Bible can. And Romans chapter 5, verse 6, is a great passage for telling us about this. For while we were still weak at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die. but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

This little word so is amazing. It's so important because it's telling us how God has shown his love, how we are to know that God has shown his love.

How can we know? Because he sent his son, and he sent his son to die. And so if you're asking the question, how can I know if God loves me, think about the cross.

Think about Jesus hanging on the cross. Think about his arms stretched out with nails in each hand. Think about his body in agony.

[33 : 02] Think about him bleeding. Think about him in such pain and such suffering that we cannot even describe and we probably don't even want to. think of Jesus on the cross and

remember that he is saying, I love you this much.

I love you this much. God's love for the world is amazing. God's love for you is amazing. amazing. May we all respond to that love and put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you for what your word teaches us.

And we just stand amazed before the truth of the gospel. How a God who is greater and mightier and more wonderful than we could ever imagine could show us such incredible love. love. And Lord, we thank you and we bow down before you for what you have done for us. And we pray that you'd help us all to understand these things.

[34 : 23] Help us all, Lord, to know your love and to respond aright by putting our faith in Jesus Christ. How we thank you for what you've done. We praise you in the name of the Lord.

Amen. We'll conclude by singing to God's praise from the Sing Psalms version of Psalm 63. Psalm 63 on page 80. Psalm 63 from verse 1.

O God, you are my God alone. I seek your face with eagerness. My soul and body thirst for you in this dry weary wilderness.

We'll sing verses 1 to 5, three stanzas to the tune where these words to God's praise. Amen. O God, you are my God alone.

[35 : 36] I seek your face with eagerness. My soul and body thirst for you in this dry stos' I love the life, and so my lips will sing your praise.

God bless you, Lord, throughout my life, and raise my hands to you in prayer.

My joyful days will sing your praise. My soul is fed with riches fair.

Thanks for all that you've done for us. We thank you that we are able to meet around your word, and we ask that as we part one from another, your blessing will be upon us, and that you would enable us all by your grace to trust in you, to live for you, and to glorify you.

In Jesus' name, Amen.