



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 3:16

Winter 2021-22

"Immeasurable Love"

TRANSCRIPT

We have a great text today; that's John 3:16. So this is a great chapter, as I've said, I think, in the beginning of our studies in John 3. And, as you know, it begins with Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. And I think it was F. F. Bruce that said, "When we come to verse 9 and Nicodemus asks a question, "How can these things be?"; from verse 10 on, the dialog becomes a monologue. We don't hear from Nicodemus again." Then he made the point that when we come to verse 16, "The monologue becomes a meditation." And what he meant by that was 'We're not sure who is speaking here: if it's the Lord that continues speaking or if John is now explaining—because we have the word *'for'*, which indicates an explanation.' So we can't be dogmatic on that. It could be either the Lord continuing to speak or John now explaining things. Our verse is,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

John 3:16

Let's bow in a word of prayer,

Father, we do thank You for this glorious text; the time we have to deal with it, really, is not enough time; but we pray that in the time that we have, You would bless the ministry that will attempt to explain this text in its fullness and its glory. And we pray

that You would open our hearts to receive it, receive all the ministry that's given this morning; that of music and prayer and reading and teaching. It's a great privilege to be with Your people as Warren mentioned. This is where we come and study Your Word and we are hopefully, through that, sanctified; made more and more like Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so LORD, we do thank You for this time together, and pray that You'd minister to our hearts, and that they would be exalted to You; and that we would see what a great and glorious Savior we have in the Triune God—Your love expressed to us and accomplished for us through the sending and the work of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank You for Him, and thank You for the salvation that we have. It's all His work. We receive it through faith, and faith alone. So LORD, bless us, bless us with the hearts that praise You for what You've done.

And LORD, the great privilege we have in praying, as we're doing at this moment, is to be able, not only to pray for ourselves in this hour and the hour to come, the LORD's Supper together, but to intercede for others. And so we do that, LORD, we pray You'd bless Your people. Some are going through difficulties, and LORD, the list goes on of individuals we could pray for. And the good thing is You know them all and You know them better than we do, and You know their needs, and You're going to deal with them. And we are thankful for that.

Bless all of us, physically, bless our health, and most importantly now, bless our spiritual condition. Strengthen us, build us up in the faith. And we pray that we would become more and more like the Savior, more and more like Christ. We thank You for Him, and it's in His name we pray. Amen.

(Message) Shakespeare called brevity, "The soul of wit." The Roman orator, Cicero, said, "Brevity is the best recommendation of speech and the great charm of eloquence." So keep it short and simple.

After the battle of Marathon, where the Greeks defeated the Persians and preserved their freedom; and really preserved the freedom of the western world,

Pheidippides ran 26 miles back to Athens with word of victory. When he arrived, he gasped the good news, "Rejoice. We conquer!" —then collapsed and died.

Short and sweet. Important messages often are. Our text is. One sentence: But there is no more important sentence in all the world than this one, John 3:16, filled with truth and hope.

Martin Luther called it "The Bible in miniature." Others have called it, "The golden text", and "The little Gospel". F. F. Bruce wrote that, "The message of this verse is so effectively stated that probably more people have found the way of eternal life through it than any other text of the Bible." It too has the Good News of, "Rejoice. We conquer", because its message is the greatest message that the God of creation, the God who is the judge of all things, loves sinners. I don't think there's a greater message than that. And His love for us is infinite and immeasurable.

Verse 16 begins with an indication of that with the word "So". In the Greek text that's the first word of the verse, so I think there's emphasis upon that. "For God **so** loved...", "**So** much did God love...", to such an infinite degree, "**So** much did He love that He gave..."

We see the greatness of God's love here in four ways. And we'll look at it according to these four ways: the *object* of love; in the *gift* of His love; in the *nature* of His love; and in the *purpose* of His love.

Well, the *first* is the *object* of His love. Love always has an object. The husband loves his wife, a daughter loves her mother, a patriot loves his country. And here we read that 'God loves the world'. Well, as I said a moment ago, could there be any better news than that? The Creator of the universe, the Judge of this world, and the Judge of men and women's hearts —loves us. Now that's not just good news—that is the Good News. That's the Gospel!

The great theologian and exegete, B. B. Warfield, made that point in his sermon titled, "God's Immeasurable Love." He pointed out, like Isaiah, that to God, [who is above the heavens, who not only fills the universe but is outside the universe; the heavens cannot contain Him—He's the almighty], to Him 'the earth is a speck of dust on the scale.' That's how Isaiah describes it in Isaiah 40, verse 15. The earth is great to us; we marvel at this giant orb that turns in space. Yet it's nothing to Him.

He has absolutely no need of it. All of the ages of this world and this universe are like a nanosecond to Him. All the universe, with its galaxies, millions, billions of galaxies, is just like a drop in His hand. And yet, God set His love on this small world. And not just small—but a flawed and fallen world. Now that is great love.

We're impressed, rightly, when a father loves his son or daughter—but we expect that; it's natural. What we can't fathom is a father who may have mercy on one who took the life of his son or daughter. But that's us; that's what we did. And that's Warfield's point, "That God is so great", he said, "not because the world is so big but because the world is so bad."

People tend to measure God's love by the size of the world, that we see here in this text, and the number of people that are saved; and the LORD has saved a large number. It will be, in the end of it all, like "the dust of the earth", (Gen 13:16),"the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore." (Gen22:17).

But a big number of people, even the entire population if that were the case, is a very inadequate measure of God's love because it is still a finite number—far too small to reflect the infinite love of God.

The point here: It's not *numbers* of people; it's *types* of people. Jesus, (or John), doesn't mean that God sent Christ into the world to save every *person* in the world but to save people from every *part* of the world. I think that's clear from the next verse, verse 17, "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." The scope or extent of God's love is defined by the purpose of His love. And it states very clearly in verse 17, the purpose of His love is to

save. And God, of course, cannot fail in His purpose. His purpose cannot be frustrated—He sent His Son to actually save.

Not all are saved—so what is the ‘*world*’ that John is speaking of here? John defines it for us elsewhere, in Revelation chapter 5, in verse 9, where he records the song of the 24 elders in heaven, who sang praise to Christ for His work of salvation, for His redemption, His purchase of people out of judgment and into life. “You were slain”, they sang, “and purchased” (or redeemed), “for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” (Rev 5:9).

The more literal translation of that is: “You were slain and purchased for God with Your blood, **some out** (literally), of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” So He didn't come and purchase *every* tribe and tongue and people and nation. He died for *some* out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation: that is the *world* and all of its parts.

Redemption is an actual *purchase*; and it was *particular*. Evangelism, that which we do, is *general*. We're like fishermen who throw out a net broadly, widely, in an attempt to catch *some*. Christ did not come in that way, dying *generally* for all—hoping to *save* all; or at least save *some*.

No, He came for His people to redeem them out of sin and death to save them; which I find to be a very encouraging fact, the *particularity* of it, the *specificity* of it. He came for you in particular. Not in some general way but in a specific way. If you are His, you are on His heart from all eternity. He came personally for you and faced the cross with joy; knowing that through that cross He would save you by His death.

Later in chapter 10, the Lord says that He lays down His life “for the sheep”. (vs11&15). He calls them ‘My own’. ‘He knows them, and they know Him’. (vs14). He died for them to give them eternal life. From eternity, He saw you ruined by sin and in rebellion—yet loved you and came specifically to save you: His sheep, His lost child—at the cost of His own life. Now that's the measure of His love for you now—out of this

fallen world from which God has chosen a people for Himself, His elect. He is rebuilding the world by saving people from every part of it.

That's the world of John 3:16. It's not all without exception, it's all without distinction. But it is not narrow. It is not restricted by race, as Nicodemus' colleagues thought. It is broad. When God planted the compass of His love and drew a circle around those that He would save, He did not draw that circle around one little nation but around the nations. He drew a wide circle, so that His people are a multitude from every nation. They're all kinds of people, which defines the dimensions of His love. It is worldwide in its scope—and it is deep. Again, it is for sinners, for rebels. It reaches down into the darkest pit for the vilest of men. It is a great love.

And the greatness of God's love is also seen in the *act* of His love. Love is *giving*. That's the *second* way we see the greatness of God's love here. God so loved that He gave. And as we've seen, and as we know, He gave His Son, He gave Christ. And the greatness of that gift is indicated in the description John gives of Him as His "only begotten Son." (vs16).

This is really the greatest measure of God's love—those who love much give much. Love is often measured by its sacrifice—and God sacrificed His own Son for us. And not just any son but His 'unique Son', His 'one and only Son', His "beloved Son." (Mat 3:17). That's really the meaning of this word; and in Greek text it's a single word: "only begotten" —a word that stresses the greatness of the gift. God gave the very best gift that He had to give. He gave the Son whom He loved from all eternity, His perfect Son, His divine Son; He gave us His best and greatest gift. It's hard to imagine that. It's really impossible to comprehend it.

The Bible, though, gives us some help with that with an illustration, or an example, from the Old Testament in the life of Abraham. One you're very familiar with when God told Abraham to 'Take his son, his only son whom he loved, Isaac, and offer him up as a burnt offering.'

The words, “your only son whom you love”, (Gen 22:2), echo the words “only begotten”. Isaac was not Abraham's only son. You know that his first son was Ishmael. But Isaac was Abraham's unique son. He was the son of a miracle, a son given to him in his old age when he was too old to produce a child and an heir. And he was the son of blessing, the one in whom all of the promises that God gave to Abraham would be fulfilled. He was the son whom Abraham prized. He was the son whom Abraham loved intensely—all his hopes were in that boy. And God said, ‘Take his life, offer him up on Mount Moriah as a sacrifice, a burnt offering.’

Abraham obeyed. He went north to Moriah, bound his son, laid him on an altar, and prepared to draw his knife across Isaac's throat—when God stopped him. It was all a test of Abraham's obedience. There's no greater proof of Abraham's love for God than that—no greater proof of his faith than this deed: That he did not withhold his own son from God.

A story has been told that illustrates the love that parents have for their children from an incident that supposedly happened long ago in the Far East. There was a terrible famine in the land. A father and mother were reduced to absolute starvation and the only possibility of preserving the family was to sell one of their children into slavery. Well, which one? They had four sons. They couldn't sell the oldest: He was the firstborn and the heir. The second son was so much like his father that he seemed to be a reproduction of him—and the mother said she would never part with him. The third son was so much like his mother that the father said he would sooner die than let him go into slavery. The fourth was their last, their youngest, their baby, their little Benjamin—and they couldn't part with him. So they concluded that it was better for them all to die together than willingly part with one of their children.

Well who, with children of his or her own, can't sympathize with those parents? Who would give up one of their children? —Who?

God would; and He did. He so loved us that He did not spare His own Son. He sent Him into this dark world, this fallen world—and He sacrificed Him to spare us. What

He stopped Abraham from doing, He did with His beloved Son; when He led Him up the same Mount Moriah and laid Him on the altar of the cross. No one was there to stop His hand—and the sacrifice was made. That was God's gift to the world, His own Son.

His love is a giving love, it is a costly love. It is a love of infinite value. Now do you really think that He could sacrifice His own Son, His eternal Son for a lost soul and that soul could remain lost and not be saved? God cannot fail in His perfect purpose. He can't fail in His perfect love, which is immeasurable love—and also an eternal love.

That's the *third* point, that's the *nature* of it. We've seen it in the *object* of His love. and secondly in the *gift* of His love...and now in the *unconditional nature* of His love. We read that God "loved"—and that word *love* is in the past tense. He *loved* us before we were. He *loved* us from all eternity and purposed to save us from before the foundation of the world.

Sin and the fall did not take God by surprise. He had drawn up His plan of salvation long before Satan drew up his plan of deception; and long before Adam sinned. The promise made to him and to Eve in Eden, when their sin was found out, was the promise of a deliverer—one who would break the head of Satan under His foot.

700 years before Jesus' birth, Isaiah prophesied of Him all through that book. But in Isaiah 53 we have that great text of "My Servant". (vs11). And in verse 10 Isaiah wrote that "The LORD was pleased to crush Him, (*His servant, His Son*), putting *Him* to grief"—and all prophesied long before our Lord was born.

And after the crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, verse 23, Peter declared that Christ was delivered up "by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God." It was done by wicked men, he says. "This man...you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put to death." But all of that was simply the outworking of God's eternal plan of salvation for us. Later in Acts chapter 4, verses 27 and 28, Peter and John and the church declared that at the cross Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and Jews did whatever God's "hand and purpose predestined to occur." It was His eternal plan.

So God's love is an eternal love. And that means it is also an *unconditional* love because it was for sinners whom He saw as rebels from all eternity. He didn't look down through time and see some 'good' folks and some people that would 'believe' and He chose them. No, He looked down through time and saw nothing but rebels—and chose them. That's where He determined to save them.

Paul puts it much that way in Romans chapter 5, in verse 8 when he speaks of the love of God. He said, "God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." That's the measure of God's love, that He would give such a great gift for such unworthy people.

It's not for the deserving. It's not for the lovely. It's for the undeserving. It's for the enemy, for those who have sinned against Him. That's Scripture. And that's the mystery of His love, that's the mystery of salvation; and not that He did not chose to save everyone, as He could have. We should not marvel over the idea that He did not choose to save everyone. The marvel, the mystery of God's love and His plan of salvation is that He chose to save anyone at all—out of this wicked world. His love is unconditional.

Well, the *fourth* way we see the greatness of His love is in its *purpose*, in its *goal*. It's twofold. That's, at least, the way it's presented for us; negatively and then positively. That's how John, (or our Lord), states this fourth aspect of His love. God sent His Son to die so that, *we should not perish eternally*. That's what man merits, that's what we all merit is the punishment of our sins—which is endless punishment. "The wages of sin is death," Paul says. (Rom 6:23).

Eternal death. Hell forever. —That is a dreadful thought, isn't it? Should be to us. It's such a dreadful thought that we can't even hold it in our minds. I think if we treat it somewhat, I don't want to use the word *flippantly*, but if we treat it *casually* it's really because we cannot conceive of how dreadful that is. But it is the clear teaching of the Bible and it's the teaching of Christ Himself: Which adds urgency to life; it will end and eternity is before us.

But Christ is the Savior from that terrible end. He died that we might escape punishment, that we should not perish but have everlasting life; eternal life; endless life. That is a future hope, the hope of glory: Unending, unimaginable glory and joy that is barely sketched out for us in the Scriptures with images like 'streets of gold', and 'gates of pearl.' (Rev 21:21).

There will be no more sickness, no more sadness, no more pain, no more suffering of any kind. Twice in the Book of Revelation, John reveals that 'all of our tears will be wiped away'. (Rev 7:17, 21:4). That's what God's going to do.

There will be reunion with friends and family. We will be with and know the innumerable multitude of those saved down through the ages: the great saints of history and the myriads we've never heard of.

But most importantly, we'll be with Christ. We will know Him as we have never known Him. And then, and only then, we will learn how much He loves us and how much we owe Him. In fact, we will spend all of eternity learning more and more and more about that. It will never end.

God has gained all of that for us through His Son's death by lifting Him up on the cross, (like that bronze serpent in the wilderness), and punishing all of our sins in Him. The whole matter of sin was resolved at the cross. God's justice is now vindicated; He is satisfied and now is free to show mercy as He desires. It's for us simply to receive the free gift of Christ, the free gift of life in Him by believing in Him. That's all. It's what our text says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

For us, the crucial word there is *believe*. That's how we receive the gift of life; that's how we lay hold of Christ, through faith alone. It is the indispensable channel of saving grace.

So what is it? It's important to know what *faith* is; it's so crucial to this verse and to us; and I think it can be understood. And this is often explained in this way, understood in three parts.

First, faith involves *knowledge*; understanding the content of the Gospel—what it is that the individual must believe. Well, to believe it we have to understand it first of all, so it involves knowledge. It involves the knowledge of what is proclaimed: That God's Son became our substitute in judgment. We're sinners. We deserve the wrath of God. We're born under the wrath of God. (We come to that in the next passage that we will study at the end of this chapter.) It abides on us as long as we are in unbelief an unregenerate state.

We can't save ourselves, so the Gospel is that, 'God sent His Son to be our substitute, to take our place, to bear our sins and be punished in our place.' And He's done that—and the resurrection is the proof that God accepted His sacrifice. So there's nothing left for us to do; the debt is paid: Salvation's work is finished.

Secondly, faith involves *assent*. It's not enough to just know what the Gospel is. We must acknowledge that the Gospel is true; you understand it and you believe that it's factual. This is an historical event that really occurred and believe that it's true. God's work of salvation is complete, it's finished, it's factual. Now both of those, knowledge and assent, are intellectual; they are acts of the mind.

Well the third is also, but it specifically is an act of the will. It's *trust*, appropriating truth, the truth of God's promise. Putting one's confidence in it, realizing that it is for me and receiving it. So believing in Christ is knowing that He is God's eternal Son who became a man in order to take our place, the place of sinners in judgment. It's believing that that's true.

And it's trusting Him—and Him alone. You put no confidence in yourself or in whatever you have done in life: In your good deeds or your honesty; your baptism or your church membership. Only Christ can save. And saving faith, true belief, trusts in Him and Him alone.

It may be weak faith. It may be very small faith without a great deal of understanding: Like the weak glance of those dying Israelites at the bronze serpent or

like a mustard seed. But it's enough—and it will grow. Christ is for the believer, whoever he or she may be; "...that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

What a great word that is, *whoever*, or *whosoever*; found in verse 15 as well as verse 16. So there's an emphasis upon the free offer of the Gospel and the generosity of God in giving the Gospel. Salvation is for *whoever* believes—regardless of race or social status, regardless of moral condition. It's for the Jew and the Gentile; it's for the rich and the poor; it's for the self-respecting and the sinner alike.

The death of Christ is sufficient payment for all our sins, for an infinite number of sins, and an infinite number of sinners. Sufficient for all—but it is efficient only for the 'all' who believe. All of that is in this one short sentence, and we could go on.

So after beginning with the virtue of brevity as I introduced this sermon, I may sum up the meaning of this verse with Dr. Johnson's short explanation of it—I can't do better than he did; "God loved and Christ died for all believers in the world."

Are you a believer? If not, you're lost and perishing eternally. It is appointed for me to die once and after this *comes* judgment. (Heb 9:27).

But God offers you life. It's in His Son. It is eternal life, life that is for the believer, that is received through faith alone, and received at the very moment of faith. The moment one believes, the moment the sinner believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, he or she is justified, he or she is given this great position of sons and daughters of God. —We have life at that moment. And once it is received it can never be taken away; it is eternal life that Christ has obtained for the believer, endless life, grounded in God's immeasurable love and Christ's all sufficient sacrifice.

William Cowper put it beautifully in his hymn, "There Is A Fountain":

"Dear dying Lamb,
Thy precious blood,
Shall never lose its power,
Till all the ransomed church of God,
Be saved to sin no more."

Are you part of that ransomed church? You can be—through faith alone. That's the promise of this great verse.

I mentioned at the beginning that Martin Luther called John 3:16, "The Bible in miniature." He loved this verse as all Christians do. It was important to him to the very end of his life. As Luther lay dying in Eisleben, the home of his birth, he was heard to murmur three times, "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Nothing can give you more hope in your last hour than this great truth. Nothing can give you more hope and joy today than that. He has given us eternal life, not temporal life, not temporary life—but eternal life.

If you've not believed in Him, believe and have that life. "Oh", you may say, "but I'm not sure I'm one of the elect." Well, you can't know that. You can't know that you aren't. Here's what you can know—the elect believe; so believe! Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust in His atonement on the cross; and in so doing discover that you were chosen by God from the foundation of the world, and His Son came specifically for you. May God help you to do that. Believe and live.

Father, I think it's true that none of us can explain how we could benefit, why we would benefit, from His ransom for us—the ransom paid at the cross. And yet we know His wounds have paid for it and we are saved through Him and Him alone.

Thank You for the glorious and great promise and statement we have here of the Gospel in John 3:16. Thank You for sending Your Son: Your perfect, eternal Son into this world, to die for us. And Father, make us grateful for that; may we live in light of that and seek to live to Your glory.

And now LORD we pray that You would bless us and keep us. And may the LORD make His face shine upon us and be gracious to us. And the LORD lift up His countenance upon each one of us, and give us peace. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

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