

# 1. For God so Loved

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Date: 26 July 2019

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[ 0 : 00 ] Every week on Friday was our missions hour. And we had a guest speaker come each week from a different organization to speak to the students and to get them informed and excited about World Mission.

One week a man came, I won't mention the organization. His work was recruitment, trying to raise up missionaries. He began his talk and I'll never forget his opening words.

They were this. Today you may think I'm going to say something heretical. And I remember thinking to myself, just by his manner, yes, I think you probably are.

And he, in a sense, didn't disappoint me. He was a man with a great passion for the climate and for the environment.

And that's fair enough. Part of our role as Christians is to be stewards of the world God has given us. He saw care for the environment as part of our Christian mission.

[ 1 : 09 ] I don't agree with that. And if you come tomorrow, I'll explain why. But that's okay. I think care for the environment is important. My problem was how he tried to ground that biblically.

And he quoted John 3.16. The word world is cosmos in Greek.

For God so loved the cosmos. For God so loved the melting ice caps. For God so loved the climate change, the ozone layer.

For God so loved the endangered species. Therefore, we should love the cosmos too. Now, this man had been a pastor. He knew full well that's not what John 3.16 is about.

That's not the world of John. Because then it says, as you know, that whoever believes in him, not whatever tree believes in him, or cloud or ice cap believes in him, whoever believes in him should not perish.

[ 2 : 19 ] If our Lord spoke those words, or John did, they're speaking about people. Not about the creation, the environment.

And he knew that. So I wrote a letter to this organization expressing my unhappiness with his talk. I want to think with you tonight about this wonderful verse from John 3.16.

Perhaps the best known verse in the Bible. A much loved verse in the Bible. But it is, it's familiar to us. And that's the problem, I think.

With something familiar, you can lose its wonder. I've been to India a couple of times. And I've been to see the Taj. Anybody seen the Taj Mahal? Yes?

I've seen the Taj by day and by night. I just thought the Taj was spectacular. The Taj Mahal. Mind you, if you live beside the Taj Mahal and you saw it every day, you think, oh, there's the Taj.

[ 3 : 25 ] I've not seen the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo's wonderful painting, but I think it's breathtaking. But if you're a cleaner, who clean there every day, oh, there's the Sistine Chapel, that's nice.

You'd lose the wonder of it. That's our problem with John 3.16. It's a wonderful verse. We know it so well, we've forgotten the wonder. So I hope tonight, by God's grace, to give you, to recapture the wonder of this verse, maybe give you some new insights, but again, to challenge you about world mission in the light of this verse.

Well, like every verse, it's a verse with a context. And the context, as you probably know, is our Lord's conversation with Nicodemus about being born again, or probably more literally, being born from above.

And in the whole discussion, Nicodemus, as you may recall, is just confused. He's bemused. I get physical birth.

I've seen babies born. I get that. But I don't get spiritual birth. That does not compute to Nicodemus. He says, how can this be? So the Lord then goes on to explain the impossibility of bringing about in

anyone's life faith apart from a work of God.

[ 4 : 55 ] You may have an unbelieving, you probably do, an unbelieving mother or father, or brother or sister, or son or daughter, or cousin, uncle, next door neighbor, workmate, and you long for them to know Jesus.

But you know, humanly speaking, it's impossible. You can talk. You can live a godly life. You can pray.

But unless God does something in their life, unless there is a spiritual birth, they cannot be saved. That's God's work. That's our Lord's point. It's God's work. Now, if you read this passage, 3, 1 to 15, it's interesting how it begins in Nicodemus talking to Jesus.

But as they have the discussion, Nicodemus kind of fades from the scene. And it changes. In English, as you know, the word you is both singular and plural.

Right? Brian, I'm talking to you. Church, I'm talking to you. The same word.

[ 6 : 11 ] In Greek, there are two words for you. Singular and plural. So, our Lord says to Nicodemus in chapter 3, verse 5, Very truly, I tell you, Nicodemus, singular, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again or born of water.

Then in verse 11, another very truly, Very truly, I tell you, all of you, we speak of what we know. It's like he's talking to Nicodemus and then suddenly he turns, addresses everybody. All the listeners, all the hearers, all the readers, I'm talking now to you.

Nicodemus fades away. He's now speaking to us, all of us, about the importance of being born again. And then he begins to explain to Nicodemus how this takes place.

how someone is born again. He takes him to a part of the Bible as a Jew he should know. Of a time in Israel's history when the people sinned and God was going to destroy them and Moses prayed for them.

[ 7 : 40 ] And God said, okay, put up a pole. On the pole put a snake. Whoever turns and looks at the snake, I will spare, I will save.

John chapter 3, verse 14. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up and everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

Amen. They had a second chance at life by looking and believing. That's the background.

Now we come to John 3, 16. And it begins in this way. In this way, God loved. So our normal translation for God so loved the world is a little misleading.

That is, the idea is we think God loved the world so much. God has such intensity to his love, such passion, he gave his son.

[ 8 : 52 ] But that's not John's point. The point's not the intensity of God's love, but the expression, in this way God loved.

In this way God showed his love. Just like putting up the snake on the pole, in that way he saved them, so in this way God showed he loved you. It's a picture of the expression, the demonstration of God's love.

In this way he showed he loved you, and it says he loved you. Past tense. Now of course God loves us.

He cares for us day by day, but that's not what John writes. He loved us. See, there are many ways in which God's love is different from our love.

This is one way. God's love for you is shown primarily in an event that took place 2,000 years ago. You see, in the Bible if you doubt for a moment that God loves you, maybe your family have turned against you, or things are hard at work, or you can't get work, you're struck by illness, you wonder does God love me?

[ 10 : 13 ] The Bible says yes he does and you can know that because 2,000 years ago on a cross outside a city he gave his son for you.

That is the great demonstration of God's love. In this way God loved and God loved the world.

Now again, the point is not to emphasize the bigness. God's love embraces a vast globe of 7 billion people. It's so big. That's not John's point. The world in John is the world that rejected Jesus.

The world that killed him. It's not the world's bigness, it's the world's badness. God loved the world. God loved bad people who hated him.

That's what's amazing. God loved a sinful world. God loved that world. The world that killed his son, he loved that world.

[ 11 : 27 ] It's the world's badness, not the world's bigness. Part of our problem I think is friends, apart from the microphone. You get these tall odies out, that's the price you pay for tall Australians.

I think part of our problem is we don't take sin as seriously as we should. There was a preacher theologian of 300 years ago called Jonathan Edwards.

He wrote a famous, preached a famous sermon called Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. It's worth reading. He describes sin like this.

If every sin, therefore, though comparatively small, deserves eternal death and destruction, how dreadful then is the deserved punishment of wicked men and women, whose hearts are full of sin, full of complete anger to God, and all his good and set upon all manner of evil, whose very natures are full of sin, as a viper is full of poison, who have lived all their days in sinful practices, who have committed sin continually, as consistently as they have rose or laid down, or ate or drank, yea, from whom sin has flowed continually, as water from a spring, sin, one sin, deserves death, and says Edwards, we've done that thousands and thousands of times, that's sin, from Edwards, here's sin from a modern theologian, breaking rules is wrong, but breaking relationship is worse, because God is love, sin should be understood essentially as a refusal of love, made for a relationship, humans have the ability to accept or refuse that, the meaning of the fall into sin is that instead of trusting God and finding security in him, the couple try to find it in themselves, sin.

[ 14 : 38 ] That is a very different view of sin, isn't it? I flew here from Melbourne and then Singapore, I like it to be honest if I'm flying on a plane to have beside me an empty seat, I just want to bury my head in a book, and if someone tries to talk to me and be friendly, I am, well, I bury my head in a book, which isn't very nice, is it?

That's not very, to refuse their love isn't very nice, hardly worthy of eternal death and destruction, to refuse love. Sin is much more than a refusal of love, it's making God your enemy day in, day out, for your entire life.

The God who made us, sustains us, and day by day by day to disobey him. That's the world God loved.

the world of people who treated him like that. In this way, God loved that kind of world.

So what did God do? Well, he gave the world his very best, his son. Now, again, please, don't misunderstand that, as some people do.

[ 16 : 15 ] There's a very well-known story you may have heard or may have even told yourself. It's about a man called John Griffiths. I think it's largely a true story.

He worked in Mississippi. His job was to control a great big railway bridge. There's a bridge over the river. You know the story? I see some nods around there.

The bridge over the river. What John would do, he'd pull a lever, the bridge would open and the boats could sail through. He'd pull the lever back, the bridge would close and the train would go over the bridge.

That was his job, to control the railway bridge. One day he went to work with his son called Greg, eight years old. Greg saw his dad open and close the bridge.

They went for a walk along the catwalk to have a picnic over the river. It's about twelve o'clock. Time goes by. John hears in the distance a train whistle.

[ 17 : 15 ] It's the 106 Memphis Express with 400 people on board. He says, John, Greg, sorry, Greg, you stay here.

I'll go back to the control tower. I'll open the bridge, I'll close the bridge and the train can go across. So John goes back to the control tower. He looks up and down. The no boat's coming.

He's about to close the bridge. When he sees Greg has followed him, slipped, fallen down, his leg is trapped in the great gears of the bridge, weighing eight tons.

And John knows if he closes that bridge, he'll crush his son to death. what's he do? His only son, whom he loves, a train with 400 people on board.

There's a rope there, maybe I can take the rope, run back, lower the rope, there isn't time. There isn't time, the train's just moments away. He can hear the clatter of the wheels, he can hear the whistle, it's moments away.

[ 18 : 25 ] But it's his son, his only son, 400 people, what do I do? He knows what he has to do. He closes his eyes, he pulls that lever, he crushes his son to death, and the train goes across.

And he looks up through tear-stained eyes and sees the people on the train, completely impervious to what's happened. The men drinking tea, children slurping ice cream, ladies talking, he cries out,

people, don't you know I gave my son for you?

Don't you know, don't you care? And the train rolled off into the distance. Have you heard that story?

I hate it. It's a terrible story, and it's not the cross. God caught on the horns of some terrible dilemma.

Oh no, says God, what can I do? Oh dear me, I'm in a bind, what do I do? Do I save my son? What do I do? This is the sovereign God.

[ 19 : 53 ] What a foolish picture of God. What a wrong picture of God. God. And the son, some unwitting victim? Not at all. The father and the son together worked to save the world.

Jesus said, no one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.

I have authority to lay it down again, and authority to take it up again. some people call those stories cosmic child abuse.

And I can see why. God, the angry God, to save the world from himself, mind you, abuses his son and kills his son.

That's not the cross. the cross. That's not the cross. For God so loved the world, he gave his son willingly, the son who died willingly, that he might be saved.

[ 21 : 10 ] That's the cross. So, therefore, the duty of every man or woman, that whoever believes on him, whoever turns to look at the son of man on the cross, might be saved.

You may have heard of the great Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. When he was 16, he was in a Methodist chapel in Britain on a cold winter's day.

There was a guest speaker there who spoke from Isaiah 45 verse 22. look to me and be saved all the ends of the earth.

At that point, he turned to Spurgeon and looked at Spurgeon. He said to him, young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look, look, look.

Spurgeon later wrote, I saw at once the way of salvation. Like as when a bronze serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed.

[ 22 : 31 ] So it was with me. I had been waiting to do 50 things, but when I heard that word, look, what a charming word it seemed to me.

Oh, I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun.

And it's just so simple, isn't it? Look to Jesus. Some years ago I interviewed a woman to work at the Bible College, not to teach, to work in the Bible College.

I asked her, do you have eternal life? Are you sure of that? She said, yes. I said, well, how do you know?

She said, well, I just know. I said, what would you say to someone so they could find eternal life? I said, I'd tell them to read more.

[ 23 : 43 ] Not read more, but unless the Bible, not read more. Look. Turn to Jesus. Believe.

Look. Whoever believes in him should not perish. Again, let's not misunderstand that.

You see, some people respond, how can a God of love send people to hell for not believing in a name they've never heard of? We saw a moment ago that how many two billion people have not heard the name of Jesus.

How could God send them to hell for that? All those people lived before Jesus and since then, billions who've never heard of him. How can God send people to hell for not believing in Jesus? Well, he won't, of course. The Bible does not say the wages of not believing in Jesus is death. The Bible says the wages of sin is death.

[ 24 : 59 ] Those two billion people are heading for death because they've sinned. And just think, I never met Adam and Eve.

I wasn't around then. But I think Adam was probably a pretty nice guy. And Eve, quite charming, I suppose, lovely person. They just did one little thing, didn't they?

One little thing. They ate a fruit. I mean, really. God said, here's all the stuff in the garden. All of us, just don't take that one.

It's like, there's 50 doors, one says, don't enter this door, you want to go in. There's the ground, acres, don't tread here, don't stand on this grass, you want to stand there.

Don't eat this fruit. They said, we want to. And they were banished from the garden.

[ 25 : 58 ] for one sin. One act of rebellion, which we've done again and again and again.

And next time, the banishment will be eternal. Those who don't believe in the sun will perish. Those who do have eternal life. The life in the new creation. And we, my wife and I live in a small apartment in Melbourne.

We've been there five years. When we moved in, it was a dump. The previous tenants had just wrecked the place. It was filthy. Things weren't working. It was a mess.

Now, you met Sarah last year, some of you, and you remember, she's a painter. She renovates things. She takes a mess and makes it lovely. So she began to rework our apartment.

[ 27 : 04 ] It's now, as I think, it's a lovely place. If you're in Melbourne, come and visit us. It's worth seeing. In fact, you can do a tour, if you're a visitor, you can do a tour of Melbourne to visit the famous sites.

The church I attend, which is right next door to my apartment, is the oldest church in the city. That's part of the tour to visit our church. Last year, the tour leader was a friend of ours.

So Sarah met her and the tour group and they got talking. And Sarah said, you want to see our apartment? So the tour group came to our apartment, had a look around, had a cup of tea.

The next day our friend rang us and said, the group all agreed that the highlight of the tour of Melbourne was your apartment. Isn't that lovely? Don't go to the MCG, come to our apartment.

Sarah's taken a mess and turned it into something quite lovely. That's what God will do at the end of the age.

[ 28 : 10 ] Take our fractured, falling apart world and turn it into something quite lovely will be there with him forever.

What a glorious prospect. That's the great verse. In this way, God loved the world who hated him. That he gave his only son who went to the cross willingly so we wouldn't perish for our sins but live with him forever in the age to come.

That's why we preach. That's why we do world mission. I just want to say two things by way of application.

The first is this, obviously. This is really good news, isn't it? This is good news. The God's done this.

[ 29 : 24 ] I coach preachers. And a man walked into my office some years ago in Melbourne. It was five o'clock in the afternoon. He was in a suit, briefcase.

He walked in. A very nervous man. Not confident. He was shuffling around and seemed very shy. I said, can I help you? He said, well, I want to learn to preach.

I just couldn't picture this man in a pulpit. I said, okay, well, why? Well, he said, my wife thinks it would be a good idea.

I said, what do you think? He said to me, Mike, I don't feel worthy to preach. And then he said, I don't feel worthy to go to church.

I've been to church in seven years. Ever since I was unfaithful to my first wife and she left me and took the children.

[ 30 : 38 ] I don't feel worthy to go to church. Isn't that tragic? Couldn't he come to your church?

church? Isn't this the place where you find healing and forgiveness and restoration? This man has lived with guilt, crippling guilt for seven years and just a breath away is the saviour who can take his guilt away.

How tragic that no one told him your sins can be forgiven. What good news for this man? What good news? No more guilt? No more heartbreak?

What good news? Something one day he could preach about. I met a guy some years ago in Singapore. He told me a story.

He'd been a wealthy Singaporean, had two children both studying overseas. He lost all his wealth, which is a great shame to him. And he couldn't tell his children.

[ 31 : 45 ] He was too ashamed to tell them. But they found out. His son rejected him. Wouldn't meet him, wouldn't let him meet the grandkids.

He was a broken man, a broken man. So I got in my car, I drove to a garden in Singapore, I sat in my car, and I wept, and I wept, and I wept, and I turned to Jesus.

and I found salvation. What good news. What good news. A broken man finds forgiveness and life by turning to Jesus.

This is such good news for us and for the world. It's a wonderful verse, a wonderful gospel. That's the first thing.

the second is this. So what? If you believe John 3 16, what difference does that make?

[ 33 : 02 ] In 18 23, a mission called the CMS, the Church Missionary Society, sent out 12 missionaries to Sierra Leone.

Within 18 months, 10 were dead from fever. Now let that sink in. I don't know how many mysteries your church supports.

But can you imagine sending out 12 to a part of our world and within 18 months 10 are dead? What would you say?

Oh, not going there again. We've learned our lesson there. No way. Too dangerous. The committee met and this is reported.

good. The good were, for the moment, crushed by all this overwhelming sorrow. They gazed in one another's faces across the table.

[ 34 : 15 ] They knelt together at the footstool of the divine majesty. sea. And one leading layman rose and said, in a tone of deep feeling and resolve, we must not abandon West Africa.

will send ten more. And they did. And they died too.

You know, don't you, back then, that when they went on the mission field, they took their coffin with them because they probably wouldn't come home.

That was not foolish. if you believe John 3.16. I was at a mission conference in Thailand some years ago, and a young Korean American couple were being interviewed, young married couple, to go to Central Asia to replace an older couple.

The older couple hadn't retired. They'd been shot to death. men broke into their apartment and shot them because they were missionaries.

[ 35 : 37 ] And this young couple, about the age of some of your kids were their replacements. And that was not foolish, if you believe John 3.16.

John 3.16. John 3.16. John 3.16. When I went to Pakistan, my Christian friend said to me, my sons were two and a half and nine months.

How can you take your sons to a place like that? But it was not foolish if you believed John 3.16.

It wouldn't be foolish of you, whatever your age, to go or let your children go with your grandchildren to tough places.

That would not be foolish. if you really believe 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.

[ 37 : 08 ] let me pray. for every forever.

God for God teach you to share your work.

Amen. Amen.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[ 39 : 08 ] Thank you.

Thank you.