

A detailed study of John 3:16

By John Owen

This verse is often taken to teach that:

"loved" = 1. God has such a natural longing for the good of

"world" = 2. the whole human race of all ages and times, that

"gave" = 3. he gave his Son to die, not actually to save any, but

"whosoever" = 4. so that any who have the natural tendency to believe

"have" = 5. can thereby obtain eternal life.

In contrast to this, we understand the verse to teach that:

"loved" = 1. God has such a special, supreme, love that he willed

world" = 2. that, of all races, his whole people should be saved

"gave" = 3. by appointing his Son to be an all-sufficient Saviour

"whosoever" = 4. making it certain that all believers whatsoever, and only they

"have" = 5. shall effectively have all the glorious things he intends for them.

There are three things to be carefully studied here. First, the love of God; second, the object of God's love, here called "*the world*"; third, the intention of God's love, that believers "*should not perish*".

1. It is important to understand that nothing which suggests that God is imperfect is to be said of him. His work is perfect. But if it be argued that he has a natural longing for the salvation of all, then the failure of all to be saved must mean that his longing is weak, and his happiness incomplete.

Also, scripture nowhere asserts that God is naturally inclined to the good of all. On the contrary, it is evident that God is able freely to have mercy on whom he will have mercy. His love is a free act of his will, not an emotion produced in him by our miserable state. (If it was misery that attracted God's natural longing to help, then he ought to be merciful to the devils and the damned!)

The love which is here described is a special and supreme act of God's will, directed particularly toward believers. The words "so" and "in order that" emphasize the unusual manner of his love, and the clear purpose of it to save believers from perishing. This love, then, cannot be a common affection toward all, some of whom do perish.

Other scripture verses also agree that this love of God is a supreme act, and is especially toward believers, as for example, Romans 5:8 *"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* or 1 John 4:9,10 *"In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son <to be> the propitiation for our sins."* One would not speak of a natural inclination for the good of all in such emphatic ways as these.

It is clear that God wills the good of those whom he loves. Then it must follow that he loves only those who received that good. *"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"* -- Romans 8:32. So, this special love of God can therefore only be to those who actually have grace and glory given to them.

Now, Christian reader, you must judge; can the love of God, who thus gave his Son, be understood as a general goodwill in him toward all? Is it not rather his special love toward elect believers?

2. We must examine what the object of this love of God is, here called "*the world*". Some say: This must mean all and every man. I have never been able to see how it could mean this. We have already shown with what different meanings the word "*world*" is used in scripture. And in John 3:16, the love mentioned at the beginning, and the purpose at the end, cannot possibly agree with the meaning of "all and every man" which is, by some, imposed on "*the world*" in the middle of the verse!

For our part, the word is understood to mean the elect of God scattered abroad in the world among all nations. No longer are the special benefits of God to be for the Jews alone. The sense is, "God so loved his elect throughout the world that he gave his Son with this intention, that by him believers might be saved". There are several reasons to support this view.

The nature of God's love, as we have already examined it here, cannot possibly be thought of as extending to all and every man. The "*world*", in this verse, must be whatever world it is that actually receives eternal life. This is confirmed by the next verse - John 3:17 - where, in the third occurrence of the term "*world*", it is said that God's purpose in sending Christ was "in order that the world should be saved". If "*world*" here is understood of any but elect believers, then God has failed in his purpose; we dare not allow that.

It is not unusual, in fact, for God's believing people to be called by such terms as "*world*", "*all flesh*", "*all nations*" and "*all families of the earth*". For example, in John 4:42, Christ is said to be the Saviour of the world. A Saviour of men not saved would be a contradiction in terms. So, those who are here called "*the world*" must be only those who are saved.

There are several reasons why believers are called "*the world*". It is to distinguish them from angels; to reject boastful Jews who thought themselves alone God's people; to teach the distinction between the old covenant made with one nation, and the new - when all parts of the world

were to be made obedient to Christ; and to show the natural condition of believers as earthly, worldly creatures.

If it still be argued that "*world*" here does mean all and every man as the object of God's love, then why has not God revealed Jesus to everyone he so loved? Strange! that God should give his Son for them, and yet never tell them of his love - millions have never heard the gospel! How can he be said to love every man, if his providence means that his love is not known by every man?

Finally, "*world*" cannot mean all and every man unless you are ready to allow:

- God's love toward many is in vain because they perish.
- Christ was given for millions who never knew of him.
- Christ was given for millions who cannot believe in him.
- God changes his love, to forsake those who perish (or else, he continues to love them in hell.)
- God fails to give all things to those for whom he gave Christ.
- God does not know beforehand who will believe and be saved.

Such absurdities we cannot grant; "*world*" can only mean those persons scattered throughout the world who are the elect.

3. The way in which the elect of God actually come to obtain the life that is in his Son is said to be by believing. It is "every believer that shall not perish."*

*[It does not help the cause of universal atonement to suggest that "whosoever" means "anyone", indefinitely. 1. The form of the Greek words actually is "every believer." 2. To argue for "anyone" is effectively to deny that God's love is equally to every man! If some "the whosoever" can be especially favoured, then God cannot have

loved all men equally. He must somehow have loved "the whosoever" more than the rest!]

If it be argued that Christ died for all and every man, and yet now we learn that only believers shall be saved, what makes the difference between believers and unbelievers? They cannot make them to differ. But if God made them to differ, how can he have given Christ for them all?

The verse declares God's intention that believers shall be saved. Then it follows that God did not give his Son for unbelievers. How could he have given his Son for those to whom he did not give the grace to believe?

Now let the reader weigh-up all these things, and especially the first, the love of God, and seriously ask whether that can be a general affection to all, which can tolerate the perishing of many of those so loved? Or, is not this love better understood to be that unique, special love of the Father to his believing children, which makes their future secure? Then you will have an answer as to whether scripture teaches that Christ died as a general ransom - fruitless in respect of many for whom it must then have been paid - or as a particular redemption gloriously effectual for every believer. And remember, this verse John 3:16 is so often used to support the idea that Christ died for every man - though, as I have shown, it is completely inconsistent with such a notion.

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