

What If John 3:16 Was Not True?

John 3:1-17

March 16, 2014

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may 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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

A certain medieval monk announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation gathered. In the dark chancel, the monk lighted a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound. In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the chancel. There was nothing else to say.

The love of God is the most amazing thing there is. The apostle Paul was so amazed by the love of God he wrote: *[Nothing] in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom 8:39). God's love for us is higher, wider, and deeper than the universe. Simply put, God's love is in a category by itself.

In today's Gospel reading, we find the verse that is probably the most familiar verse in the Bible, John 3:16: *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.*

This verse is often called "The Gospel in a Nutshell." In just 26 words, we are told how great God's love is, what his love motivated God to do, and why he did it. God's love is so great it extends to and covers the whole world; you and me and everyone else past, present, and future.

God's great love motivated him to offer up his one and only Son. God willingly gave

Jesus as a sacrifice to save people from their sins. And God did this so we might be brought back from the punishment of hell, and spend eternity with him in heaven. It's not surprising many adults and children claim this verse as their favorite.

In our text, we learn the situation that gave birth to this verse. Jesus was speaking with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a high-ranking pharisee. But instead of the close-minded attitude most pharisees had about Jesus, Nicodemus went to Jesus to find out exactly what Jesus was all about.

At the close of their short discussion, Jesus used these 26 words to explain God's plan for the salvation of mankind. And the explanation wasn't wasted on Nicodemus. Later, after Jesus had been crucified, it was Nicodemus who went with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus.

Some of you might be thinking I'm preaching to the choir. You know all of this, right? Of course, you do. However, I have said all of this because I want you focused on this one verse – this "Gospel in a Nutshell." I want you to focus on John 3:16 so I can ask the question in the sermon title. What if John 3:16 was not true?

If I was a betting man, I would be willing to bet you have never considered that question. The implications are horrendous. It's quite scary to even ask the question. John 3:16 is the very bedrock of our faith. However, even these 26 words can lose their impact if we don't stop and carefully examine them every now and then. By asking and answering the question, I think we can grow our faith.

The question "What if John 3:16 was not true" brings up four sub-questions. We will answer the primary question by asking and answering these four sub-questions.

The first question: **What if God had not loved the world?**

God's love is not an emotional thing. God's love is an act of God's will. There is nothing about us, in our sinful condition, that would make God want to love us. God loves us because he chooses to love us and no other reason. So we can't take God's love for granted, and we need to ask what if God had not chosen to love the world.

Without the love of God for this world, we would be missing something human beings cannot live without – hope. What takes you from one day to the next – the certain hope this is not all there is. What takes you through the most difficult times in this life – the certain hope this is not all there is. What stops you from throwing in the towel and giving up on this world, yourself, and everyone around you – the certain hope this is not all there is.

Without the hope conveyed by God's great love for us, there would be no reason to live. It's the hope we receive from God's love that gives purpose to our existence. People, who end their own lives, do so because they feel all hope is gone. The saddest grief at any funeral is the grief of unbelievers who have no hope.

But God does love the world. Everything in all of creation speaks of the love of God. Every flower, every sunrise, every sunset, every waterfall, every birth, every season speaks of a loving God, who created a place of beauty for his beloved ones.

Most of all, the cross speaks of God's love for the world. Paul writes: *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us* (Rom 5:8). God does love us and we have hope.

Our second question: **What if God had not given his Son?**

God can love the world as much as he wants, but without the cross the love of God would be frustrated. God made the rule the punishment of sin was everlasting torment in hell. God also said sin would not just go away. The price of sin must be met, and the price of sin is a perfect sacrifice. That price is beyond our reach.

John 3:16 tells us about God's love – and love always demands giving. Selfish love is an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms. When a man loves his wife and family he unselfishly gives his time and effort to see to it his loved ones are cared for. When a woman loves her husband and family she unselfishly gives all of herself to nurture and care for them.

Without the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, salvation would only be a dream that was never fulfilled. God set the price for sin and God paid the price for sin. In the enormity of his love, God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. God gave us Jesus as the only way back to him. God gave us Jesus so we might have God's grace.

The third question: **What if God's offer of salvation was not to the "whoever's?"**

Whoever is a special word. It is both singular and plural. It can mean one person or everyone. John quotes Jesus as saying: *whoever believes shall not perish but have eternal life*. Paul writes: *Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Rom 10:13). This offer is for you, it's for me, and it's for everyone.

But what if God had not gone the "whoever" route? What would be the fate of the poor if God had only offered salvation to the rich? Or what about the rich if God only offered salvation to the poor? What if God had only offered salvation to the healthy or the educated? What if God had made salvation available only to people of a certain race or gender or age?

But that's not God's way. God's salvation is for whoever. God doesn't limit his love to people of specific qualities. After all, God isn't like you and me. God wants: *All [people] to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4). God's invitation is for everyone to believe and be saved. God's invitation is for whoever.

Our last question: **What if God's offer was not based on faith alone?**

If God's offer of salvation was not based solely on faith, we would be in a sad state of affairs. Can you imagine working your whole life trying to please God, doing everything in your power to earn salvation, only to die and find that you didn't do enough? Without God's provision of faith alone, that would be the fate of everyone. Scripture tells us that: *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Rom 3:23).

All the education in the world won't save your eternal soul. Neither will money, status, beauty, youth, popularity, or even leading a good life. Faith is all that is required to bring God's grace to you – and faith is the only thing that will bring God's grace to you.

But is faith enough? Paul told the Ephesian church: *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God* (Eph2:8). It was faith alone that saved the thief who was crucified with Christ. It is faith alone that saves you and me.

The possibility of John 3:16 not being true is a very scary thing. The good news is, John 3:16 is true. John 3:16 is our promise of salvation – a promise made by the God who has never broken a promise.

As Easter draws closer and we once again experience the fulfillment of God's promised salvation, share the good news of John 3:16 with someone who doesn't know their Savior. Remember, God's love, God's Son, and salvation by faith alone are all for whoever.