

for us to end the year dwelling upon the love of God, the love of God. And as we come to John 3, 16, this morning, I ask that we would hear this passage like we've not heard it before. It's such a familiar text. All of us may have it memorized or certainly we've heard it before. And yet, There's depths to it. There's riches in it that our familiarity may keep us from appreciating. And that should not be the case. We want to grow in our love and knowledge, even of passages that we have heard many times.

Well, to set up the context, if you don't recall, a religious leader, a Pharisee named Nicodemus has come to Jesus by night. at the beginning of John chapter 3. Jesus says unto Nicodemus, you must be born again. Nicodemus, a leader in Israel, is confused. He asks Jesus, does this mean that I must enter my mother's womb a second time? How can a grown man be born again? What he doesn't understand is that Jesus Christ is talking about regeneration. spiritual birth, that a man must be born again and born from above by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And as Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus, in the verses immediately preceding John 3, verse 16, and verses 14 and 15, he actually makes a reference to Numbers 21. He talks about the serpent, the bronze serpent, you may remember, that was put on a pole in the wilderness when the people had been bitten by snakes because of their sin. And you remember perhaps that the way they could be saved from the punishment of their sin, these poisonous snake bites, was to do what? To look to the serpent on a pole suspended between heaven and earth, and they would look to this serpent set up on a pole suspended between heaven and earth, and their sin-filled, snake-bitten bodies would be healed.

And you do realize that that points forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, who would be suspended between heaven and earth. And you do realize that you need to have your snake bitten, sin filled, bodies healed. And how can you be healed? How could those Israelites be healed of their snake bite that represented their sin? Look, look to the one and only savior of sinners, the Lord Jesus Christ suspended between heaven and earth. And you can imagine that when those Israelites heard this remedy, imagine you're one of those Israelites, you're told, here's how you need to be healed of your snake bite. Look to this serpent over here, this bronze serpent on a pole. You might think to yourself, how in the world is looking to this bronze serpent gonna heal me of this snake bite? You might think that message seems a bit absurd. It seems perhaps too good to be true. It might seem like it's a bit silly that merely looking to this serpent could bring me healing of my snake bite and ultimately of the sins that are represented by my snake bite.

But isn't that the simplicity of the gospel? Look to the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. all the ends of the earth. Look to the Lord and you will be saved all the ends of the earth, the prophet Isaiah says. Some people probably looked with a bit of doubt in their hearts. Some people probably looked with hesitation, without complete confidence. Were those people healed of their snake bite? and the sins that their snakebite represented? Yes. Why? Because it wasn't the strength of their eyesight that saved them when they looked to the bronze serpent. It was the one to whom the bronze serpent pointed. It pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the object of their faith, ultimately, that brought them healing. This is the context for John 3, 16.

Let us pray and ask God to bless now the reading and preaching of his word. Oh Father, pour out your spirit upon us for your own glorious name's sake. In Jesus's name we pray, amen.

John chapter three, verse 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. Thus ends the reading of God's holy word. May he add the blessings to the reading and now the preaching of it.

Well, as we come to this text this morning, I want us to try to wrap our minds around incomprehensible ideas, incomprehensible subjects. You could think, for example, about one incomprehensible thing, which would be trying to count the grains of sand on planet Earth. Can you imagine trying to count all the grains of sand all over the entire Earth? That would be incomprehensible. But there are things that are more incomprehensible than this. It's been estimated how they do these sorts of things, I don't know, but it's been estimated by scientists, for what it's worth, that there are far more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on planet Earth. And you know, I'm sure, that each one of those stars is far larger than planet Earth. They're more like the size of the sun. And that's incomprehensible to try to wrap your mind around that. And this morning we come to something, dare I say, that is more incomprehensible than even these things. We come to the incomprehensible love of God. And that's what I want us to consider this morning. The incomprehensible love of God. And we're going to do this quite simply by looking at six words in the text. God, loved, world, gave, believe, and eternal. God loved world, gave, believe, eternal. Six words from John chapter 3 verse 16.

So first let us consider this word God. Who is this according to the text who loves you? Who is it who loves you? Well the text says for God so loved the world. This is The self-existent God. This is the one who created all things of nothing. This is the one who has never lacked and the one who doesn't lack. In fact, it's the one who cannot lack, the one who cannot need anything because he has all he needs in and of himself. He's independent. And it's specifically, of course, God the Father here who is in view. You know that because it's God the Father who sent His Son.

Do you realize that God the Father loves His people? And He doesn't love His people because the Son forced Him to love His people. The Son did not come so that the father would love his people. The son did not come and sort of twist the arm of his heavenly father and force his father to do something that his father otherwise was not interested in doing. Anybody who's had children has had that happen. Your child comes to you and they plead with you and beg you to do something and eventually perhaps you concede and it's something that otherwise you were not interested or willing to do. But you were sort of forced to do it in some sort of manipulative way. That's not the reason that the father sent the son. He didn't send the son and the son did not make him therefore love us. The son came not so that the father would love us, but because the father loves us. The text reads, for God, that is the father, so loved the world that he sent his son.

So the father was not tricked or duped or forced into loving his people. He loves his people. That is why the son came. Not so that the Father would love his people.

But why is it important to consider who it is that loves you, that the Father himself loves you, this great and awesome God who loves you? Well, it's important for this reason. Because it means you here this morning who are in Jesus Christ already have the love that matters most.

All human beings, and this is appropriate, it's not a bad thing, all human beings long to be loved. That's a part of being a human being, is you want to be loved by someone. And that's not wrong to want to be loved. But you aren't

always loved. And sometimes, it's because you have not warranted the love of someone else. Perhaps you have given another person a just reason, perhaps, to not love you. And still you long for love. You long to be loved. And sometimes you don't have that love in this life. Sometimes it's because we live in a cruel and wicked world. And that is true, but sometimes it's because we have contributed to the lack of love that we experience.

But what this text is saying to the believer is that God the Father loves you, which means you have the love that matters most, which should free you up to live in gratitude, to live in thanksgiving, to live with joy, and to not constantly be trying to get love from other people. And when they're not willing to extend love to you, which perhaps they should, but when they're not willing to, you don't have to lose heart. Because even though they may not love you, your heavenly father does, and his love is the love that matters most.

So this word God is significant because it's the greatest being, a being that can't even be compared with. He's in a category all of his own, and this is the God who loves his people.

But secondly, let's consider this word love. For God so loved the world. This word love is important for of course many reasons, but one of which I want us to consider this morning is the fact that it's in the past tense. For God so loved the world. There was no beginning to God's love for you. And so as it's been said, the greatest assurance that you can have that God will never cease loving you lies in that he never began to love you. There was never a time when the father began to love his people. He's loved his own people from eternity. That's why Ephesians chapter one says, in love he predestined us for adoption to himself. In love he predestined, he chose his people for himself from before the foundation of the world. It's past tense.

So you're a Christian here this morning and you fear that your heavenly father will cease loving you. You operate functionally anyways at times as if he ceases to love you when you transgress his commandments. God does not cease to love you when you transgress his commandments. His love was never dependent upon your law keeping. His love preceded anything you've ever done, either good or bad. His love had no starting point, and it will have no ending point. He loves his people from eternity to eternity.

But functionally, often, the believer will operate as if in the midst of our sin, God's love for us is no more. But God does still love his people, even when we transgress his commandments. And truth be told, if he did not, he would never love his people. Because all of even our best deeds are marked with some level of impurity, even if we cannot detect it in our own sin. Now, it's not the same as saying that God takes pleasure in our iniquities. God does not take pleasure in the iniquities or delight in our iniquities. It is an offense to him, but he does not cease to love us. And that should bring you courage as you battle your sins. It should stir you up to keep fighting because your God still loves you and you want to please him. You want to bring a smile metaphorically to his face because nobody's ever loved you like he's loved you. And nobody ever can or will love you like he's loved you. And so your response ought to be, my desire is to not transgress his commandments. But it's not because he ceased loving me. It's because he loves me even though I transgress his commandments. Therefore, I want to do everything I can to please this Heavenly Father who has done everything for me.

Thirdly, let us consider this word world. We've looked at God, we've looked at love, let's consider world. For God so loved the world. What in the world does the word world mean here in the text?

There are several possible legitimate interpretations and I'm going to give you one absolutely wrong interpretation. Then I'm gonna skip over two potentially legitimate interpretations. You might hold to one of those two. So you've got one really bad one that's just wrong. And then you have three decent options. And I'm gonna tell you the bad one and what I think is the right one. And if you hold one of those other two in the middle, we can talk later. But I do really heartily believe that this, the option I'm gonna give you, I believe very confidently it's right, okay? I think the word of God is attests to this, but the bad one, the one that you're not allowed to hold to, or you can, you just, you have a really bad view of the Bible, and you need to learn what Jesus teaches and trust in him, is this, this is the bad view, that the word world here means that God saves everybody.

Okay, that's called not true, and it's called not Christianity, and it's called evil, okay, because clearly the Bible tells you that God has not saved everybody, okay, that's just, abundantly clear throughout the scriptures. How far from John 3.16 do you have to go to learn that that can't be the right interpretation? How far do you need to read? Well, if you read verse 17, you'll learn that God doesn't save everybody. What does verse 17 say? For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Go on, whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe in is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God. So there are clearly people who are condemned already, verse 18.

And so people are condemned. People are going to perish eternally. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that certain people would not perish, but certain people are going to perish for eternity. They're going to die in their sins. So that view is just certainly not biblical. It doesn't add up.

But what is the right view of John 3, 16 in this word world? What does the word world here mean? The word world here is an ethical world. It's an ethical world. Now, having said that, you're thinking that didn't make any sense. What does ethical world mean? Well, let me explain. What John is getting at here is how deep the Father's love is for his world. It's an ethical world. Meaning this, you might translate it like this, for God so loved sinners, for God so loved worldlings, for God so loved those who hated him and wanted nothing to do with him, worldlings. What the word world is getting at here is not how big is the world, but how bad is the world. It's not the extent of God's love that is in view here, but the intensity It's not the breadth of his love, but the depth of his love. It's not the quantity of his love, how much, but the quality of his love, how deep, how pure, how unimaginably grand is it.

Now, somebody might say, well, that really made this not so loving after all, but I object to that. Because what he is saying here is God loved people who hated him. God loved people who were dead in their sins. Sinners who didn't want him. Sinners who despised him. Wicked, rotten, foul people, blind, dead, pitiable fools. Those are the people that God has set his love upon. That does not lessen This text, it heightens this text because it shows you the depths of his love, that he would love people so undeserving of it.

Well, how does scripture itself show that what is in view here is sinners, is the quality and not necessarily the quantity of love? How does Scripture bear this out? Well, John uses this word world about 100 times. And the majority of the times, it refers to sinful, rebellious world system. It refers to the world system that has rejected God. So for example, 1 John 5, 19. The whole world lies under the power of the evil one, 1 John 5, 19. The whole world lies under the power of the evil one. When you read that, do you think that John, 1 John 5, 19, the whole world lies under the power of the evil one? Do you think he's saying that every single individual lies under the power of the evil

one? Because that's what it says, the whole world. Well, obviously not, because the same author, actually, I believe it's earlier in the same exact chapter, says, he who is in you, is greater than he who is in the world. So he's not saying that every individual, including the believer lies under the power of the evil one. What he's saying is the whole world, meaning the whole world lies under the power of the evil one means that all those who are outside of Christ lie under the power of the evil world system of darkness and depravity. They are marked by this. This is who they are. It is the ethical world. It's a wicked world

or In 1 John 2, do not love the world. We read, do not love the world. As John telling you here as a believer this morning, don't love anyone in the world, hate them all, despise them, reject them, want nothing to do with any other human being in this world who is an unbeliever, because that's what he says, do not love the world. What does he mean by do not love the world? He means do not love the world system. You know that. You may have never stopped and reflected on it, but you sort of intuitively know that when he says do not love the world, he means don't love the world system, don't love the sin and the depravity of this world. And so here, what he is telling you is that God loved this people that were marked by this worldliness, by sin and depravity.

What can that bring you this morning as a Christian? Well, what it tells you is this. Though your love is not perfect here this morning, God never loved you because your love was perfect. He loved you even in your sin. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And this can bring you confidence on your deathbed. This is what I call deathbed theology. You need deathbed theology, right? You need theology that doesn't just make you smile on Monday morning, which is good, that's fine, but you need theology that when you're going to die will bring you hope, deathbed theology.

When you're on your deathbed, you remember that God loved me, not because of anything in me. He loved me even though I was and am a sinner. He loved me because he loves me, and that is deathbed theology.

Martin Luther, famously on his deathbed, quoted this verse among others, for God so loved the world. This is where he found his hope.

Fourth word, gave. This word gave. For God so loved the world that he gave. Now, if we're going to understand this word gave, we actually also need to step back just for a moment and consider that word so, for God so loved the world.

When we hear this word so, we often think that what John is saying here is God loved the world so much. That's actually not what he means. Because the word so literally means in this way. This is the way in which God loved the world.

So for example, look back at verse 14. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so, the exact same word, verse 14, so must the son of man be lifted up. Well, the word so in verse 14 clearly doesn't mean so much. It means in this way.

So look back at verse 14. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the world, in this way must the son of man be lifted up. And so, Verse 16 now again, for God so loved the world, or this is the way in which God loved the world. And how did he do it? He did it in this way. He gave his only son.

But why did he give his only son for his people? Why did God do that? It's very important. Did he give his son just to be a motivation for you today to try harder and do better? Remember that he gave himself for you, so shouldn't you try harder and do better? That's not entirely untrue, but is that the primary reason that he gave his son, just to be a motivation for you to try harder and do more and be a better person? Is that why the Son of God came? To help you do for yourself what you could already do for yourself?

No, he came to actually do something. He gave him to actually accomplish something. And what was that? To be a propitiation for our sins. to be a propitiation for our sins. What's a propitiation? It's a wrath remover. You need somebody to remove the wrath of God on you for your sins. And Jesus Christ has come to accomplish just this.

You think, well, where is that in the text? Look at verse 36. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but what? The wrath of God remains on him. So either the wrath of God remains on you or the wrath of God has been propitiated, has been dealt with in Christ for you in your place.

Or 1 John 4, verse 10 says, in this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to do what? 1 John 4 10, sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins. It's been said the father of mercies committed his son to miseries for us. And this is his only son. He's eternally equal with his father and he gives him up for us to be a substitute, a sacrifice on the cross for us.

What does this imply? Well, this implies that Jesus did not come to merely make salvation possible. He came to accomplish salvation. When he was given up for you on that cross, he did not make your salvation a possibility. He made your salvation, who are trusting in him, an actuality. He accomplished it on that cross. And so we should be rejoicing in what Christ has done for us this morning. He gave him up for us, taking away all the wrath that our sins deserve.

Fifth, believe. Believe. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish. How do we receive this great gift of God's love? How do we receive what he has done for us? What work must you do? You don't do any works to save yourself. You can never work to save yourself. I'm sure I've said it here many times, but if you could work to save yourself, then Jesus Christ died for absolutely no reason. God the Son was a waste, right? It's been said before, if you could save yourself, then God the Father would be guilty of throwing his son away. Why? Because he came all the way down from infinitely high to infinitely low to do for a people what a people could do for themselves.

Christianity is radically different than every other way of viewing the world and yourself and God. Because every other one says do something to save yourself and this says you can't do anything. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. And so you receive it by belief. This is the way it's always been. Genesis 15, verse six, Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

And what is faith? What is belief? Well, it's been said of faith, if this is helpful for you, a little acronym, forsaking all, I trust him. Faith, forsaking all, I trust him. That can be helpful. It's more than just intellectual ascent. It's not, For God told the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes things about Jesus Christ will be saved. Yes, you must believe things about Jesus Christ. You have to believe certain things about him. But it actually says believe in him. You have to trust in him. You trust in the actual person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ for your actual sins and transgressions and your original sins, your very nature as one born in Adam. You are a sinner by nature, and you are a sinner by actual transgression, by your actual deeds, and both your nature and your actual transgressions. You believe in him, and he redeems you of all of your sins, pays for all of them. You trust in him.

You have to realize you need him if you're gonna believe in him. You won't believe in him if you don't believe you need him. Now, this analogy I don't think I've used before, but if I have, bear with me. But it's helpful, I think. The way you might think of belief as it is found in scripture is like this. Imagine you have, on the one hand, a man who spent his whole life studying honey. He's got a PhD in honey. He knows everything you could ever want to know about honey. He could put it under a microscope and tell you the molecular makeup of honey. But, strange that he chose this profession, He has a honey allergy, so he can't actually eat honey. He's never tasted honey in his life. On the other hand, you have a man who's, I couldn't tell you the first thing about honey, but I can tell you this much, I love honey. It tastes amazing. That man who's actually eaten honey, in a very real sense, knows honey better than the man in the laboratory. Why? Because this man's tasted honey. Have you tasted Christ? Have you tasted him? It's one thing to be able to say a lot about him, but belief in scripture and faith in scripture is experiential as well as it is an intellectual ascent. It's not less than ascent, but it is more than ascent. Taste the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luther famously said that repentance is daily, right? To repent is a daily activity. We repent every single day of our lives. And he was right to say this. But I would like just to add to this, and Luther would not object to this, I'm sure, but that exercising faith is also a daily activity. that repentance is to be daily, but so is faith to be daily.

And that's actually indicated in the text because the word belief here is a present participle, meaning it's ongoing daily activity. Many of us have probably fallen in the habit of thinking that John 3, 16 is a verse for the unbeliever primarily, that you get saved on that verse, but then you move on to better things. But the actual way it is worded is that you are believing continually in him. You're trusting in him daily. And this is so important because how are you going to repent daily if you don't believe daily that Jesus Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for you? Do you see?

So you commit some sin this afternoon or tomorrow and it's something you're really ashamed of that you have done. You do something that you really know you ought not to have done. What truths do you need to believe so that you will repent of that sin? Being told you need to repent is true, you do need to repent. But what do you need to believe to get you to repent? You must believe that Christ is sufficient for you. You must believe that you're not wanting to ever minimize your sin, but you have to believe that though your sin is disgusting, he loves you. He, he has sent his son and the blood of that son is sufficient even in the midst of your transgression. And if you don't believe that his blood is sufficient for you, you will not repent. Because you'll say, he can't forgive me. And then you just spiral.

But this text says, believe daily in the sufficiency of the blood of Christ for you. That he was lifted up like that serpent in the wilderness for you. And so you can say, without minimizing your sin, His blood is sufficient. I can, by grace, repent. I can turn to Christ because I believe that that sacrifice is real for me today.

Well, sixthly, our last word, eternal. Eternal, what is it that we receive when we receive this great work of Christ and the love of God the Father for us? We receive, according to our text, eternal life. Now, we know from Scripture we receive more than that, and we could talk about other things, but we're gonna look what this text is telling us. We receive eternal life.

Now, eternal life here is contrasted with eternal perishing. On the one hand, you have perishing, should not perish, and on the other side you have eternal life. One is unimaginably awful, that would be perishing. It's unimaginably awful what those who do not repent and trust in Christ will receive. It's perishing for eternity. But what you receive and trust in Christ is eternal life. It's unimaginably glorious and wonderful.

But we have to realize that what is in view here is not just an amount of time, quantity, but it is a quality of life. It isn't just a duration of time, but an actual quality of life. And if you simply think about it, that has to make sense to you because living forever is not inherently the most exciting thing in the world if your life is terrible. Being told you're going to live forever now and you're in an absolutely miserable condition is not really good news. It's, I mean, you might take it, but You may not even want that if you're in a low enough place.

Eternal life is not just a duration of time, an amount of life, but a quality of life. And it begins right now. You have eternal life today who are trusting in Christ. You have, according to the text, eternal life.

The same thing is seen again in verse 36, whoever believes in the son has, that's present tense, verse 36, has eternal life. Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. So these are the options of John 3.16. It's eternal life or eternal perishing. And it starts today. You either right now are under the wrath or you are under the glorious gift of eternal life because of nothing in you. You've simply been willing to receive the great work of Christ for you in your place.

Well, today we've looked at six words from John 3, 16, and I think we can see something of the fact, I hope, that this is an incomprehensible love of God. This love of God for the believer is incomprehensible. It can be understood truly, but not exhaustively. It can be apprehended, but it cannot be comprehended. And I want to close with this thought as we finish this morning.

It's often been said of believers that we live beneath our privileges, that we have all these great truths that are true of us, but we don't live with them as though they're true. And this morning, a profound application of this text would be for us to live like this is actually true of us. It would change our attitudes. It would transform the way we treated one another.

Now, this is an incredible church, just frankly speaking. God has been very kind to us. I am amazed at his mercies to us. I see unbelievable brotherly love and sisterly, it's just incredible. But we could always be maturing, and knowing this love would grow us in love for one another, in love for God, in joy in the Holy Spirit, This sort of truth would transform everything. Let us not live beneath our privileges. Let us live like we have this, because if you're trusting in Christ today, you do. This is true of you.

Let us pray. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you and praise you for your unimaginable and incomprehensible love for us. We pray that you would grow us in sincere, humble, childlike belief that this love is ours ours because you have set it upon us in Jesus, and he has propitiated all of our sins. He has quenched the fiery wrath which was set against us, and he has quenched it because you loved us and wanted him to be the quencher of your wrath. And there was no other way for us to be reconciled to you.

Forgive us, O Father, for living often below our privileges, dull and angry and prone to misspeak and to live wrongly when we have this glorious love. Forgive us, O Father. Forgive us and give us strength and grace to believe these true words of John 3.16. All of us in this room likely have heard them and maybe even all of us have memorized them and some of the little children perhaps haven't, but they're learning them. We pray for all of us from the littlest children to the oldest saint in the room that these words would be life transforming. Would we love you because of your love for us? Would we love one another because of your love for us? Would we treat our spouses differently, we would treat our children and our grandchildren differently, have mercy on us. Use these words for your glory in our lives. In Jesus's name, amen.