



John 3:16
A Pearl of Great Price



Every student of world history knows that the Bible's majestic story of creation, fall, and redemption through Jesus Christ turned the Roman Empire upside down, laid the foundation for Western civilization, and to this day is challenging and transforming people all over the world.

But here's something you may not have known:

John 3:16—the most famous verse in the Bible—contains the whole message of the entire Book. It's like a beautiful pearl tucked deep inside a giant clam or oyster. In this short text, Christ himself gives us the heart, the core, the very essence of the Word of God.

Here, then, for spiritual seekers who may be new to the Bible, are a few thoughts carefully selected from the Bible itself in order to display the meaning, truth, and beauty of this pearl of great price.

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GOD:

This is the Supreme Being—the infinite personal Spirit—who reveals himself to us through nature, conscience, and the sacred writings of the Jewish people. In those writings we learn that there is one God—the omnipresent creator, possessor, sustainer, and ruler of the universe—eternally existing in three divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here in John 3:16, Christ is specifically referring to God the Father: He who gave God the Son to the world.

SO LOVED:

God is love. Throughout all eternity the three divine Persons have known and loved one another, dwelling together as a kind of Holy Family in a bond of perfect peace and joy. But the love of the triune God also overflows onto his creation, and in particular onto us human beings: creatures uniquely fashioned in God's own image and likeness, and therefore uniquely endowed with a capacity to know him and live with him as his children. In our text, Christ is telling us that God the Father, moved by his great love, has gone to the greatest possible length to make that capacity ours again.

THE WORLD:

The reference here is primarily to the family of man that God, in the beginning, created to rule with him over the earth, and to journey with him down the long corridor of universal history. The human father of this family was the man Adam. In the Garden of Eden, it pleased God to test Adam: to see if he would use the gift of his freedom to love and honor his creator by believing and obeying his word. With the benefit of hindsight we now know that the world itself hung in the balance, for by God's wise decree Adam stood in Eden as the head and representative of the entire family of man, and as the prince of the whole earth. Had he obeyed God and partaken of the Tree of Life, Adam would have lifted both man and nature into an eternal union with their triune creator. As it happened, however, he did the opposite: He disbelieved and disobeyed, with the result that evil, suffering, and death invaded the very good creation that God had made. In particular, because of Adam's plunge into sin, all of his children would henceforth be born in a state of sin: alienated from the life of God, centered on self, driven by various dark passions, hostile to God, and willfully disobedient to him in thought, word, and deed. What's more, because of their sin, many of those children stood—and now stand—beneath their sovereign creator's righteous anger, and in danger of eternal punishment. Yet despite the depth of its sin, God has always loved the family of man. Indeed, he loved it so much . . .



THAT HE GAVE:

It is God's nature to depend on nothing; it is man's nature to depend on God. It is God's nature and joy to give to man; it is man's nature and joy to receive from God. As it is written, God is the One who gives life, breath, and all things to his beloved creations. Therefore, knowing well our need of spiritual rescue and restoration—and knowing well his Father's gracious plan to meet that need—Christ speaks here of God's greatest gift to the sinful family of man: his uniquely begotten Son.

HIS UNIQUELY BEGOTTEN SON:

Throughout all eternity the divine Father uniquely begets the divine Son whom he loves: With neither beginning nor end, the Son is "true God from true God." With a view to saving sinners from eternal punishment, with a view to begetting them afresh as his own beloved children, and with a view to their sharing forever in the life of the Holy Trinity, the Father, in an act of supreme love, gave us his uniquely begotten Son in the form of the God-Man: the Lord Jesus Christ. Through his incarnation, Christ entered the world as the last Adam: the head and representative of a new human family that God, in eternity past, had purposed and planned to create. Throughout his holy life, Christ maintained a perfect righteousness, a righteousness that God will credit to the account of all who believe in him. Through his sacrificial death on a Roman cross, Christ freely suffered the penalty of God's broken Law on behalf of all who would put their trust in him. And through his resurrection from the dead, Christ was publicly revealed to the world as its one and only Prophet, Priest, and King: the all-sufficient Redeemer of the fallen family of man.

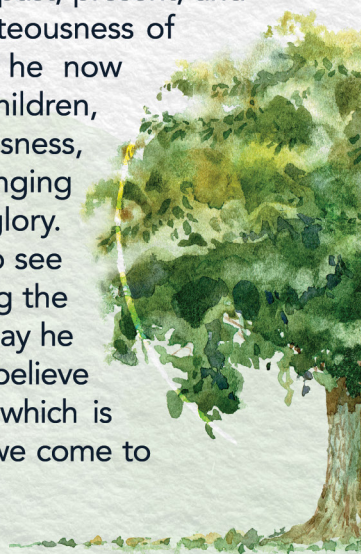
SO THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM:

In the Bible, redemption is twofold: *rescue* from evil, suffering, and death, and *restoration* to the manifold blessings of life in union with God. Because God's Law is written on our hearts, we are constantly tempted to think that we can redeem ourselves by being good and doing right. But Scripture is emphatic: Sinful man can never be good enough, nor can his good deeds ever outweigh or cancel his bad. So here Christ tells us how we really can be redeemed: *by believing in him*. Such believing is also twofold. First, by God's grace—and usually in the midst of an earnest search for spiritual truth and reality—we see who Christ is and what he has accomplished for us. And secondly, having seen, we *respond*. That is, we turn away from our old self-centered life governed by various lusts, and turn to a new Christ-centered life governed by love. It all begins by calling on the name of the Lord: by prayerfully receiving Christ as the all-sufficient redeemer that God meant him to be.

When we do this, God forgives us our sins—past, present, and future—and credits us with the perfect righteousness of his Son. Furthermore, on those grounds he now welcomes us into his family as his beloved children, granting us a whole new life of righteousness, peace, and joy—together with many challenging trials wisely designed for our good and his glory. In the Garden of Eden, God tested Adam to see if he would believe and obey him concerning the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Today he is testing Adam's children to see if they will believe and obey him concerning the Tree of Life, which is Jesus Christ. Will we turn from our sin? Will we come to Christ? Will we partake of him and live?

WILL NOT PERISH:

Sinful man is perishing day by day. By willfully rebelling against his creator, and by knowingly keeping his redeemer at arm's length, he falls further and further away from the life of God, and deeper and deeper into sin, corruption, and death. Here Christ is telling us that if this fall continues—uninterrupted by repentance and faith—God will give to the sinner in hell that which he chose for himself on earth: separation from the life and gifts of God under eternal punishment. Understandably, our finite and fallen minds recoil from this dreadful prospect: We cannot comprehend the apparent severity of such a judgment. But neither can we (fully) comprehend the towering holiness of the creator, his moral obligation to govern his creatures, the scandal of their ingratitude and rebellion, the injury they inflict upon God's glory, the necessity of divine retribution, the true dimensions of Christ's suffering, and the perfect justice of the judge of all the earth. Therefore, our only safe path is to recuse ourselves from judging God, and to humbly receive the words of his Christ, who graciously promises eternal life to all who believe, but who solemnly warns of eternal punishment for all who disobey. And we can rejoice that here on earth—in the anteroom of eternity—the choice is ours.





Death

Life

BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE:

Here Christ affirms that from the moment of their new birth into the family of God, believers do in fact have eternal life: Once and for all they have crossed over out of death and into life. This is the *kind* of life lived by the triune God, and that life lived *forever*. It begins when we personally receive Christ as Savior and Lord, with the result that the triune God, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, comes to live in us, and we in him. During the days of our pilgrimage on the earth—and through our faithfulness to such basic Christian disciplines as prayer, Bible meditation, church participation, godly conduct, and Christian service—this life grows and develops as God slowly conforms us to the image of his Son. At the moment of our death it attains full flower, as our spirits enter heaven, there to dwell in perfect holiness and joy with our exalted Lord. And it is consummated at the end of the present evil age, when Christ will come again to resurrect the dead, judge the world in righteousness, and create new heavens and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed. It is written that Christians are saved in hope—and what a glorious hope it is!

The Pearl of Greatest Price

Yes, John 3:16 really is a pearl of great price, seeing that it marvelously distills the message of the entire Bible into a single sentence. But someone will ask, “How can we be sure the message is true, and that the Bible really is the Word of God?” It’s a fair question—a question that many thoughtful believers have addressed at length, and whose books on the subject are readily available to all who seek. But let me close here by offering a short reply of my own.

I believe the very best way to know that the Bible is the Word of God is simply to read it—all 66 books, written by some 40 different authors, over the course of nearly 1600 years. For when we do so with an open heart that is fully intent on discovering spiritual reality and conforming to its demands, we will unfailingly hear the Father's voice speaking to us on every page, disclosing precious truths about the divine person and all-sufficient work of his uniquely begotten Son.

We see him everywhere. In the Old Testament we see that all events, laws, institutions, poems, promises, and prophecies point forward to Christ. And in the New Testament we see that the Old Testament is fulfilled, for now Christ has come, miracles are performed, truth is unveiled, atonement is made, the Savior is raised, the King is exalted, the Spirit is given, good news is proclaimed, lives are redeemed, and saints are filled with joy unspeakable and full of glory. Thus, all throughout his Book the story is the same: Here we find God the Father personally addressing every honest seeker of spiritual truth and reality, saying:



"This is my beloved Son. This is the world's one and only Redeemer, given for you. This is the Pearl of Greatest Price, he of whom John 3:16 and the entire Bible sing. So come to him, speak with him, open to him, learn from him, rest in him, draw on him, walk with him, serve with him, suffer with him, hope in him, and treasure him—always remembering that he who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it until that happy day when you stand before him face to face. So shall you never perish; so shall you have eternal life."

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