

By Elder Marty Smith

[John 3:16] For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:16 may be one of the most often cited, and most often misunderstood, verses in the Bible. Three of the main sources of misunderstanding are:

1. Interpreting the word “world” to mean “the entire human race”.
2. Interpreting the phrase “whosoever believeth” to mean “whosoever will choose to believe” instead of its real meaning, which is “whosoever does believe”.
3. Interpreting the word “loved” to mean “an emotional attraction” instead of its scriptural meaning, which is “an everlasting connection”.

Let’s consider these sources of misunderstanding one at a time:

1. The Greek word for “world” in John 3:16 is “kosmos,” which means “arrangement”. It is used in many places in the New Testament, and must be interpreted in context. For example, it is used here:

[I John 2:15-17] Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.

If “world” is “the entire human race,” then the scriptures above teach, “If any man love the entire human race, the love of the Father is not in him.” Of course, that is not a valid Bible teaching, because “kosmos” does not mean “the entire human race” here, it means “the system of selfishness and cruelty which permeates fallen human culture.” Also consider this verse:

[II Peter 3:6] Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished:

The entire human race did not perish in the flood; eight people survived on the ark. So, what does “world” mean in John 3:16? It is the world of people whom God the Father gave to God the Son before creation (Ephesians 1:3-4), and for whom Jesus Christ died, and of whom Jesus Christ said, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” [John 6:37]. It is the world God intends to save without a single loss.

2. One has to change both the tense, and the intent, of John 3:16 to make “whosoever believeth” mean “whosoever will choose to believe”! The phrase “whosoever believeth” means “those who are currently believing”. This verse is not an offer, or a warning, or a proposal to induce unbelievers to conjure up some

belief within their darkened or unbelieving souls. It is, rather, an evidence given to those who do believe, an evidence that God loves them greatly. It is an evidence to believers that God has given them the greatest gift in the universe: His only begotten Son, to die for their sins, to lay in the grave, to rise again, to return for them. God has not offered to them, but has given them, the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. “God so loved” does not mean that God felt so strongly about human beings that He would offer them a chance at heaven. “God so loved” means that God bound Himself to the people He chose in Christ so strongly that the bond could never be broken. In the New Testament, the Greek word “agape” is translated as both “love” and “charity”. Consider these scriptures about agape:

[Colossians 3:14] And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.

[Romans 13:10] Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

God’s love for His people binds Him to them, and fulfills His own holy law for them. Therefore, if God ever loves a person, that person will always be bound to God, and cannot be cast away in “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” as in II Thessalonians 1:9. If God loves the entire human race, then the entire human race is going to heaven. Since II Thessalonians 1:9 and Revelation 20:15 indicates that some will be cast away, we must conclude that God does not love every human being. We also find in scripture that God loves His people with a love that is everlasting (Jeremiah 31:3), unfailing (I Corinthians 13:8), inseparable (Romans 8:38-39) and so God’s innumerable people, from every nation, are kept forever in Christ Jesus the Lord.