

How many of you remember seeing this guy in the end zone of football games and on the 18th hole at PGA tournaments? Rollen Stewart was a ubiquitous presence at major

sporting events for almost a decade. He would usually hold a sign with John 3:16 on it and place himself at the most strategic position so his message would be seen by millions of people. He went through dozens of his rainbow wigs over the years as he tried to get the message of salvation out to the masses, that is, until his money ran out and his wife left him. Now he has exchanged his John 3:16 t-shirts for an orange prison shirt where he is serving three life sentences for kidnapping and threatening to shoot at commercial airplanes.

A much better representative of this technique is Tim Tebow. But since he won't take my advice and switch positions, we will probably never see his face on the football field again.



This is perhaps the most famous of all Bible verses. It is sometimes called the "golden text." It is probably emblazoned on more coffee mugs and wall hangings than any other Bible verse. Before

I was saved I knew this verse, even though I did not know that the verse was located in the gospel of John, let alone chapter three and verse sixteen.

We love and cherish this verse, but like the born again passage we looked at last Sunday, we often do not grasp it's full meaning within the context of Jesus' words. So let's read it and dig in.

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. 17 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. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21 But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

The big idea for this passage is that this is a divine rescue mission. God sent his son into the world to rescue sinners. There are lots of pieces and players here but at its heart, it is a divine rescue mission. First, we need to meet the Rescuers.

1. The Rescuers

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..." In the first line of the passage we see the main players. The Father sent the Son, so we already see two members of the Godhead active. We must understand that at the core of this divine rescue mission is divine initiative to engage in rescue. The Father sent the Son. This has nothing whatsoever to do with us.



In a human rescue mission, the initiative for the rescue, for example with the Coast Guard, is the inherent worth of human beings. If there was such a thing as an unmanned ship and it was in trouble, the Coast Guard would be under no obligation to initiate a rescue mission. But when humans are involved, their unofficial motto is, "You have to go out, but you don't have to come back."¹ Fundamentally, the Coast Guard is in the business of saving lives, not cargo. These brave rescuers have counted the cost and have agreed to risk their own lives to save another life. And they do so because they consider human lives to have intrinsic value. A human life is inherently worthy of saving.

This is where the Divine Rescue Mission parts ways from the Coast Guard. We must not read John 3:16 like this: "God sent his Son to die for us because we were so worthy of being saved." This is the way that this verse is generally understood but in reality is just the opposite. I'll explain that more a bit later but for now we need to understand the divine initiative in this divine rescue mission. God was 100% the initiator as we were utterly helpless to do anything.

So the Father sent the Son but we must not forget the role of the Holy Spirit. Remember that “*the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” The Holy Spirit causes us to be born again. Each member of the Godhead is intimately involved in this divine rescue mission. But highlighted here is the sending of the Son by the Father. This sending includes Jesus’ incarnation, death and resurrection. All were a necessary part of the rescue mission. But why did we need all three members of the Triune Godhead to be fully involved in this rescue mission? Because no one else was up to the challenge.

2. The Challenge of the mission

For God so loved the world. Herein lies the challenge—the world was so unlovable, so dark, so wicked. John 3:16 may be the golden love verse but John 3:16 has a context, and in that context, Jesus painted a grim view of the world. He said that men already stood condemned. He explained how they loved the darkness so that their evil deeds could never be exposed. He explained that the world did not believe him. Jesus loved the world but the world loved evil and darkness.

John 3:17 is a close second to John 3:16. We love this verse. *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.* And it true. Jesus was on a rescue mission not a mission of condemnation. However, the reason Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world because the world already stood condemned. The world was not a neutral place in which to be sent. It was an evil, dark place. He came bringing salvation because by themselves, all stood condemned.

Remember 1:1-18—what is that section called? The Prologue and there we see the first glimpse of this worldwide rejection of the Son. *He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him* (1:10-11). This rescue mission was initiated knowing full well that full scale rejection was in the future.

In his commentary on John, DA Carson has a very helpful explanation about the world into which Jesus was sent. “Therefore, when John tells us that God loves the world (3:16), far from being an endorsement of the world, it is a testimony to the character of God. God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big but because the world is so bad.”²

So what we have here is a summary of the Bible’s doctrine of sin. When you truly understand how bad the world is, only then can you start to appreciate the true glory of the divine rescue mission. Jesus used the story of the bronze snake in Moses’ day to point toward his own future. *And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* This is obviously pointing to his death and resurrection but it also has sin as the backdrop. The bronze snake was lifted up onto a pole because the Israelites needed to be saved from death.

This is the classic case of needing to understand the diagnosis before you understand the cure. The diagnosis is hopeless darkness and binding wickedness. The diagnosis is an evil, big, bad world that rejects the one who came to save it. The diagnosis was so desperate that the Father had to send the Son to bear His own wrath. Therefore, the real question is, what was Jesus rescuing us from? The typical answer is that Jesus came to save us from sin and death, and this is true. But what is the penalty for our sin? It’s not just death but eternal death. We see the answer

later in chapter three. *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him* (John 3:36).

And here is Paul's answer to the question, "What are we saved from?"

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thes. 1:9-10).

Jesus was sent by the Father to deliver us from the wrath of the Father. This is not how we typically think about salvation, is it? I like how R.C. Sproul puts it. "We are saved by God, for God, from God."³ This is a great description of the divine rescue mission. So why did God want to deliver us from his own wrath? We have already said it was not because we were so loveable. He did not look at us and say, "For goodness sake. They have their problems but they are so cute and adorable I just have to save them." What was His motive?

3. The Motive for the mission

For God so loved the world. There it is. We know the verse. We know the reason but if you do not have this love within its proper context, we will fail to see its true glory. Let me illustrate this love motive.

If you risk your life to save a family member, and for the sake of argument, we'll say you died in the rescue attempt, you are considered a hero. However, such bravery would not be out of the ordinary precisely because you considered your wife, son or daughter so worthy of being saved.

If you give your life in rescuing a total stranger, this kind of bravery begins to shed more light on the rescuer. The hero status and selfless act of the rescuer rises because he or she had no relationship to the one who was rescued. The motive of the rescuer was less about the inherent worthiness of the one rescued and more on the side of the inherent love of the rescuer. Are you following the line of reasoning here?

Now take the same scenario but this time the person who needed to be rescued was a crack addict who the previous year had broken into your house and murdered your entire family. To make matters worse, the crack addict never did any time in prison because he was let go on a legal technicality. In your estimation, is the crack addict worthy to be saved? Does he possess a fundamental right or worthiness to be saved? Quite the contrary in fact. Whether you believed in karma or divine judgment, you could make a rock solid case the crack addict did not deserve to be saved and in fact deserved to die. Therefore, to give your life for such a man would place you into the hero stratosphere. Humanly speaking, most people would not understand such a sacrifice but for those who did, the love of this rescuer would have far eclipsed that of the other two rescuers.

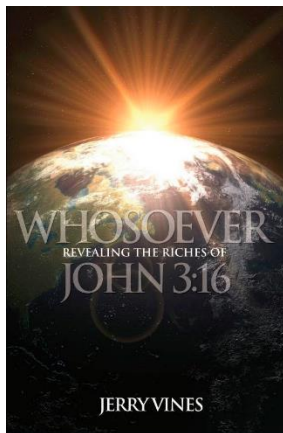
Guess who we represent in this illustration? That's right. You and I are the thief and murderer. God did not send his Son because we were so loveable but because we were so unlovable. He sent His Son to save us from His own just wrath and he did it to show his love. This is what Paul meant in Romans 5:8— *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*. God's rescue mission puts His own love on display.⁴ When we understand it as it

really is, we are to gaze at its beauty. It is supposed to be the greatest thing in Heaven or earth. It should cause us to worship the Great Gift Giver. When we grasp it, it will overwhelm us with gratitude for the immeasurable gift. Love is the motive for the divine rescue mission and when you understand it, you pen words like these.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll
contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

4. The Result of the mission.

We know the Rescuers, the challenge of the mission, the motive for the mission and now the result of the mission. The Bible continually talks about the results of being saved from sin and wrath and John mentions a few. First of all, who are the ones rescued? The simple answer is, of course, John 3:16—*that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*. But believe it or not, there has been much confusion about this phrase. Some translations have “whosoever may believeth should not perish.”



There has been a growing divide within the Southern Baptist Convention. Many in the convention do not like the growing segment of those who hold to Reformed or Calvinistic beliefs. Some are very upset and concerned about this trend so they held a conference called The “John 3:16 conference” to argue against reformed teaching. The reason they called it the John 3:16 Conference was due to this one little word—whosoever. They argued that the word whosoever proved that anyone could call upon the Lord for salvation.

Now I am not going to argue for or against Calvinism this morning because this one word does not prove anything. In the Greek the phrase I literally ‘all of those who believe.’ It is a category of people which contains those with faith.

Which of these translations best matches what it says in Greek? I am convinced the Holman translation is the best because it captures the category of people who believe.

Greek: all of those who believe
KJV: whosoever may believeth
ESV: whoever believes
Holman: everyone who believes

We all agree that everyone who believes has had condemnation removed and eternal life granted. However, this passage does not teach WHY they believe. So the why question is not answered here but it will be later in John. One result is that all of those who place their faith in Christ will have eternal life.

The second result is the fruit of that belief. The fruit of unbelief is found in verses 19-20. Their deeds were evil and they hid in the darkness. But the fruit or result of belief comes in verse 21. *But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.*” The fruit of true belief in Jesus will be works done through Jesus—those “carried out in God.”

To demonstrate the final result, I will put two theologians against each other. The one is dead and the other is still very much alive. In fact, I heard him speak on Tuesday. The first theologian is Charles Finney, who was a leader in the Second Great Awakening. Listen to what he has to say about saving faith in Christ.

“Whenever he sins, he must, for the time being, cease to be holy. This is self-evident. Whenever he sins, he must be condemned; he must incur the penalty of the law of God...The Christian, therefore, is justified no longer than he obeys, and must be condemned when he disobeys...In these respects, then, the sinning Christian and the unconverted sinner are upon precisely the same ground.”⁵

This kind of theology is why Finney was heavy on revival preaching. If what he said was true, we would be moving in and out of salvation multiple times per day. It would be like we were stuck in a revolving door of condemnation and eternal life, swinging from one to the other.

Now compare this to Dr. Don Carson. This was my favorite quote at the conference this past week. [Watch video.](#)

“It’s not the intensity of our faith, but the object of our faith that saves.” John 3:16 does not say that all who believe may not perish or have a chance at not perishing. *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* Do you believe it? Do you rest in it? Do you treasure it? Is it bearing fruit?

Rich Maurer
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¹ <http://www.uscg.mil/history/faqs/LSSmotto.asp>

² D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 123.

³ <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2010/06/04/saved-from-what/>

⁴ And see also Eph 2:4-5—*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.*

⁵ Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology*, Bethany House Publishers, © 1976, p. 46.