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John 3:16

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come.

– Rev. 1:4

### *What is Love?*

Beloved in the Lord,

“What is love? Baby, don’t hurt me, don’t hurt me no more.” Maybe some of you know that song by singer Haddaway, titled “What is love” and made famous by the SNL skit: Roxbury Guys and the movie: A Night at the Roxbury. What is love? That is an interesting question. It is deceptively simple, for it’s so hard to actually give an answer. You could seemingly ask 10 different people that question, and you would get 10 different answers. But the passage before us gives us one of the best answers.

John 3:16 is probably the most famous passage in all of Scripture. The Gospel in a nutshell! Words we all know by heart. Jesus spoke these words to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who actually would help in burying Jesus after his crucifixion in John 19:39. Here in John 3:16, Nicodemus is having a one-on-one tutoring class with Jesus. And Nicodemus and us today get a definition of love: a definition of God’s kind of love: a definition that just takes our breath away for God’s kind of love is so unique. This little verse, these few words of this text that you know by heart are words that sum up how much God has loved us and *still* loves us.

Jesus says to Nicodemus: **“For God so loved the world.”** A more literal translation would be: **For, in this way, God loved the world.** Jesus grabs Nicodemus’ attention and ours with that phrase. You’re waiting for the rest of the sentence, “in what way, Jesus?” How, in what way does God love the

world? It already takes my breath away that God would love the world in any way at all. After all, since the Fall of Adam and Eve the world has been tainted by sin and it's been getting worse ever since. This has to be a mistake. God loves a world that hates him. That killed his prophets. That killed his Son. That rejects him as the true God. That denies that he even exists. God loves *this* kind of world? This has to be a mistake. For on top of everything else, God loves a world where there is no one who even for one moment perfectly loved and served God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. And God loves *this* kind of world? This has to be a mistake.

But it's not! Here is the difference between God's love and any other kind of love. When we love someone or something, it's because there's something in that person or thing worth loving. A favorite food, a good-smelling cologne, a sharp-looking suit, a beautiful spouse. Not with God though, he loves a world that is unlovable. He loves a world that has nothing worth loving. He loves because he wants to. And so, it already takes our breath away to hear: For God so loved the world. Now, in what way does he love the world?

**“For God so loved the world that he gave...”** For, in this way, God loved the world, not with mere words or empty phrases; for in this way God loved the world that he gave - and now the heart skips a beat in eager anticipation - God loved the world and gave ... what? What is Jesus going to say? Maybe, in spite of its lost condition, God gave us a beautiful world, full of vibrant colors, a world rich in natural resources. Yes, he did, and that would be enough. But what is Jesus going to say? Maybe, in spite of us, God gave to all of us time to live, health and a measure of wealth, the warmth of close friends and family, useful work and pleasure. Yes, he did, and that would be enough. All of that would much more than any of us deserve. For if God gave us what we deserve, because of our sins, he should give us hell:

eternal separation from him. But no, that's not what he does. He doesn't give us what we deserve. He does give us all those other blessings mentioned earlier. And as lovely as all those things are, that's not what Jesus says here to Nicodemus. No, it's this: **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son!"** HE GAVE HIS ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON! That's how much he loved us. That's the way he loves us. He gives us more than we deserve, more than we could ask for, more than we could ever imagine. Doesn't it just take your breath away?

If you had 10 sons, would you give even one of them away for the sins of your best and dearest friend, let alone the sins of a stranger or Judas' betrayal of Jesus? Or for such a person as you? Of course not. It wouldn't occur to you or even enter your mind. But in this way God loved the criminal, evil, vile, stinking rotten, fallen, dead, corrupt, rebellious world that included me as every bit a part of it; in this way he loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son as Savior! God gave his only-begotten Son for his worst enemy, for the world, for you and me. That was his plan, God the Father loved to give his Son to save the world.

And how did Jesus come as Savior of the world? Again, not what we would have thought or deserve. Not as a vengeful judge. Not as God of gods and Lord of lords. But as a baby, to Bethlehem he came, for the whole world. God gave his one and only Son as Savior, Savior of the world, our Savior, my Savior. The Savior who then trudges his long and lonely journey up to the cross. Thinking about that world, and everyone in it. Thinking about you and thinking about me. He hangs there alone and abandoned on the cross. He suffers as he cries out for you, as he cries out for me, as he cries out for the world: My God, my God why have you forsaken me? That's how much God loves the world. He would forsake his own Son for this world. Doesn't it just take your breath away?

And you know what? If he gave his Son for the whole world, then ... he must have given him for ME TOO! For I am part of that world and its corruption, part of that world and all its vice and crime and sin and shame. But in this way, God loved the world - including me - that he gave his one and only Son to be the one and only Savior! That's how much he loved us. Doesn't it take your breath away? God loves you like this.

But surely there must be a catch to this kind of love we are describing. What does Jesus say? **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”** There is no catch at all! Here is where the English language fails us! When we hear “believe” we think it's us doing something.

But no, to believe, faith is done by the Holy Spirit, by God himself. There's nothing we can do! How could we, people who are sinful from conception, by nature enemies of God; how could we turn ourselves around and believe in God? And if we had to do this by ourselves, we would be lost. Unsure if we believed enough, if we were good enough or where “enough” even is. But no, as in the whole verse, this “believing” too is God's 100% love. God the Father gave his Son. God the Son dies for our sins. God the Holy Spirit creates this faith, this believing to give us eternal life. All is accomplished! All is certain! Eternal life is mine, because it depends entirely on God! That's God's promise, and God would not lie to us!

So, doesn't God's love just take your breath away? In spite of our sins, our faults, failings, selfishness, worldliness, greediness. In spite of ourselves, God still loves us. No matter how often or far we fall, God does not change, God still loves, God still forgives, we are still his baptized children, eternal life is still ours.

What comfort, what joy in knowing God's kind of love! For we still live in the world. We still are plagued by our temptations from within and those from the devil and the world. We still are surrounded by weakness, by fear

of tomorrow, by sickness, by death. We still suffer the plague of our own sinful flesh and its opposition to the Son of God and the salvation he came to win for us. We are still in this kind of world, a world that God loves with his unique kind of love. So how could we answer our question ...

What is love? One answer is in 1 John 4:10: **This is love; not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.**

What is love? One answer is in Romans 5:8: **But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

What is love? From John 3:16, this is love: that God would give his only-begotten Son for the world, for you and me. Doesn't it just take your breath away? For in this way God loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have now and forever life, life everlasting. Oh yes, now and forever, God's kind of love takes our breath away. Amen.

The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.