

# God Loved the World So That He Gave

Lutheran Service Book 571 | study by Scott R. Schilbe

## Introduction

Look across a stadium of fans enjoying a professional sporting event and you may see a fan holding a John 3:16 sign. You may even see a sports fan paint “John 3:16” on his or her body. This emphasis on John 3:16 is because for many people, John 3:16 summarizes Christianity’s central belief. Thanks be to God that this short summary of Christianity enjoys a large pop-culture following. Aside from professional sports (especially football), a reference to John 3:16 is printed on the bottom of paper cups used by the In-N-Out Burger chain.

## Exploring the Scriptures

John 3:1–21 is the account of Jesus teaching Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Jew and a member of the Pharisees. Curious about Jesus, he secretly came to Jesus at night, so that no other Jew would know of his curiosity. A catechetical conversation took place between the two men. Jesus instructed Nicodemus on how one enters the kingdom of God. Toward the end of the instruction (starting at John 3:14), Jesus speaks very directly: “Whoever believes in him [the Son of Man Himself] should not perish but have eternal life” (v. 15). He continues by speaking John 3:16–21.

Jesus’ teaching in John 3:16 is certainly comforting to us. That’s because John 3:16 applies Jesus’ work to us. Here, the purpose of Jesus’ death is revealed. He died so that we can have eternal life.

- Have you ever shared John 3:16 with a friend to summarize the Gospel message?
- Why do you think John 3:16 has become this widely known summary of the Bible’s teaching?
- Is it our action of believing or is it the object of our belief that saves us from hell?
- Despite Jesus’ words here and elsewhere (e.g., John 14:6 and Acts 4:11–12), why do many people not believe that only Jesus saves? Why do people imagine that God includes all people in eternity, regardless of their belief’s object?
- Usually overshadowed by verse 16, verses 17 and 18 are also helpful verses that clarify how one enters eternal life. Read verses 17 and 18. What do these verses conclude? Again, how is one saved?

## Exploring the Hymn

### Background

Little is known about the origins of this beloved hymn. Recent research suggests that the hymn was published in a 1778 Pomeranian hymnal. Whoever wrote it has enabled Christians to sing of the Gospel and the implications of the Gospel for the believer’s life.

### Text

Stanza 1 is a paraphrase of John 3:16. The stanza puts the verse in poetic form. Stanzas 2 and following begin explaining the implications of having faith resting on John 3:16.

- John 1:14 and Col. 1:15 express that Jesus is the infinite, uncreated and eternal Son of God. According to stanza 2, what did this Son of God do?
- What is the result of the Son of God’s work (end of st. 2)?
- What is the significance of a “cornerstone”? Who is the cornerstone (read 1 Peter 2:6; Ps. 118:22; Eph. 2:19–22)?

- In stanza 3, God’s good and gracious will is proclaimed. What is His will? Read 1 Tim. 2:3–4.
- The Holy Spirit’s work is highlighted in stanza 3. By the Word, what does the Spirit declare? Read John 15:26; John 14:26; Titus 3:4–7.

Stanzas 4 and 5 calm fearful and anxious hearts. Sickness and death make us anxious, worried and fearful of life’s end. Questioning whether or not God forgives also creates fearful and anxious hearts.

- According to Rom. 6:3–10, how can Baptism grant us the “highest good”?
- To such fearful and anxious hearts, what good news does the hymn writer give us in stanzas 4 and 5? To help answer, read Rom. 3:21–28.
- When facing death, why are constant reminders of Christ’s work for us sinners especially important?

- Based on stanza 5, how can the Christian face death and the grave?

## Making the Connection

In Matt. 10:1–15, Jesus commissioned His apostles to proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand (Matt. 10:7). The kingdom of God is God’s rule and reign of grace and mercy. The kingdom of God is the Gospel, the saving message that God forgives sins and opens heaven to us because He gave up His only begotten Son unto death.

- In what present-day ways do pastors (those who follow the apostles in the apostolic ministry) continue to proclaim the kingdom of God?

## In Closing

The next time you see “John 3:16” displayed at an athletic event or on a paper cup, perhaps you’ll be reminded of today’s featured hymn. John 3:16 nicely summarizes the main teaching of the Bible. The Augsburg Confession expresses it this way: “Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5])” (AC IV 1–3).

Stanza 6 concludes the hymn with a trinitarian reference. As with all stanzas marked with a triangle in our hymnal, we stand in reverence as we sing this trinitarian doxology.

- Who gives the apostles authority to proclaim the kingdom? Who gives pastors this same authority today? Read Matt. 28:18 and Matt. 10:1 to help answer this question.
- As the Gospel promises of God are proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is creating faith “when and where it pleases God” (AC V 2). Besides pastors, all of us can proclaim God’s Gospel promises (Is. 40:9; Ps. 105:1; 1 Peter 2:9). Think of yourselves as sowers of the Word. While sowing the Word is difficult at times, what promise does God give us (Matt. 13:23)?

- Sing or read aloud together *LSB* 571.

### Prayer

Almighty, eternal God, in the Word of Your apostles and prophets You have proclaimed to us Your saving will. Grant us faith to believe Your promises that we may receive eternal salvation; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen (Collect for Proper 6A).