

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 1:14-18

*"God Gave His Son"*

We're doing a little "Christian theology" by unpacking some well-known verses word by word: in this case John 3:16 – *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Last week we looked at the opening clause: "God" "so loved" and "the world," and discovered that what it says is that *the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of all things is devoted to the welfare of people who oppose him.* A surprising statement, I think you would agree – and not what we sometimes think of as a summary of God's work!

So we now move on to the main statement: *"God gave his Son,"* and ask what that means! We will also note the syntax: the structure of the sentence, and those little words that color and shape, create context for, give added meaning to, the nouns and verbs.

1) *God So Loves That...*

Let's first remind ourselves that "God loves" means not that he has *warm feelings of appreciation for,* but that he is *dedicated to the welfare of the world,* and that this kind of love is sacrificial. It's the kind parents have for children – the love that expends itself for their sake, that makes sacrifices not because the children "deserve them," but because that's being a parent. Parental love does not depend on the kids' good behavior or attitude or even gratitude; even when you

can't stand what they're doing, you still sacrifice for their welfare. So God, we understand, is prepared to pay the cost of *rescuing alienated humans who don't like him.*

Now it's important to note the little word "that" – "God so loved the world *that...*" It's an emphatic and logical connector, not a temporal one. The verse does *not* say "God so loved the fallen world that *after the Fall he thought up a way* to rescue it." That would make the whole of Jesus' ministry an afterthought, a reaction of God to an unforeseen problem with his creation.

No; "God so loves *that...*" means "*in order to achieve a purpose.*" The very surprising (to us) statement in several Biblical passages is that "giving his Son" was something God planned "before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4), and it "accomplished his eternal purpose" (Eph 3:11). That of course presents us with the mystery of a God who is outside time and space as we know them, who "sees the end from the beginning," and who governs all things. But it's important to know this is all about God's purpose, and not just a reaction to the Fall, because that also tells us something important about who Jesus is.

2) *God's Initiative*

We must also notice the emphatic structure of the sentence: it's all about God. *God* loves, and *God* gives. The initiative comes from

God. *He* rescues the world; the world does not go seeking him. When he brings redemption and salvation and restoration to rebellious people, it's *his* work. It's not that people suddenly decide that they do like God after all; it's that he draws them to himself; his Spirit works within them, and when they do come to faith, they know that even faith is *his* gift. "Salvation is of the Lord," the Bible says. In emphasizing this, I am of course standing theologically in a line that goes from the Apostle Paul to Augustine to Calvin, in saying that *God does* the work of redemption, *God calls* us to faith, *God puts* his Spirit within us, *God sustains* us and sanctifies us and perseveres with us and finally brings us to glory.

So here are some questions of application to our lives: do you realize God can convert anyone - even the most "unlikely prospects" in your family - because faith depends on his actions and not their attitudes? Secondly, do you realize that God is "after you"? If you have been, or still are, part of the alienated and rebellious "world" that he loves and is determined to rescue, he is pursuing you. He has, by his right of creating you and preserving you and blessing you far more than you deserve, a claim on your life. However far from him you have wandered, however much you dislike him, he is able to "reel you in" when he is ready. You are on a long rope, but God holds the end. If any of this sounds threatening, let me put it back in the words of John's Gospel: do you know that God so loves you, is so devoted to your welfare, that he will do whatever it takes, at whatever cost to himself, to bring you back into his fold and restore you to all he created you to be? Do you know that "loving" always mean "giving," and that God has a gift for you?

### 3) *God Gave*

So let's move on to the main verb: God *gave*. What does that mean? Clearly it's talking

about a person, not a thing; God "*gave his Son*." In what sense is Jesus "God's gift"? Remember that God who "so loves" is giving something valuable and precious to him that represents a cost and a sacrifice.

So the first meaning of "God gave" is that he allowed or arranged or somehow achieved that "a member of his family" left home in heaven to become a human being. However you or I may struggle with the concept of the Incarnation, with how "the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14); there can be no doubt that this is what the New Testament claims over and over. Did Jesus' first disciples grasp this? No. Did it slowly dawn on them, with much help from the Spirit of God and from Jesus' own words, that he was "more than a prophet;" that he was in fact "The One who was to come," "God's champion," "a new David," "the Anointed One - the Messiah"? Yes. Isn't it also clear that by the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century they were calling Jesus "*Lord*," the very name Israel had always used for God.

By this time, thinkers like Paul and Luke were teasing out what it meant that a divine-human figure had lived in their midst; and why Jesus had constantly called God "*his Father*" and himself "*the Son of God*" or "*the Son of Man*" (itself a divine title in the Old Testament). So when John's Gospel appears maybe 40 years later, it's no surprise to read "God gave his Son." That has to mean at least that God sent his Son to become a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish man from the Galilee area; a man whom the Greek-speakers called Jesus, but was probably known by his Nazarene contemporaries as Yeshua bar-Joseph. As Paul says in his Philippian letter, "*being in nature God... Jesus emptied himself, taking the nature of a servant, and was made in human likeness, and found in appearance as a man...*"

That at least is what it means that "God gave his Son." And even that is almost impossible

for some people to accept – maybe for you? Skeptics abound in everyday life, in church pews, and in academia, that such a thing could really happen. After all, they say, the ancient world was full of myths about “gods appearing as humans.” So here’s a challenge that this little bit of theology brings to you and me: do we accept that God’s rescue effort for the world involved and indeed required that a member of the Godhead came to earth? That Jesus was more than a prophet, more than a good example, more than a supreme illustration of God’s love, but was in fact “God in the flesh”?

There is a second meaning of “God gave” – not just Jesus coming, but Jesus dying; *not just the Incarnation, but also the Atonement*. “God gave” means he sent his Son in the flesh to love and to teach and to inspire and to be an example, but he also sent him to the Cross. “*God so loved that he gave..*” means *sacrifice* on God’s part – not just that “the Father really missed his Son” while he was gone, but that the Father delivered up his Son into the hands of “the world” with full understanding that they would kill him. In “giving” that way, God the Father paid the highest price possible to redeem a world that opposed him; he gave them his “*one and only Son.*” Just how that exchange rescues the world is a question for another day, but this is the logic: The Father so loved the world that hated him, that he gave his Son to die for them.

So it was “*Not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins;*” that’s how John would later describe this (1 John 4:10). What does all this mean to you and me? For example, what would we sacrifice for whom? What would you give to save someone you loved? Would you risk your life by jumping into a swollen river to save your wife or child? Of course you would. Would you send your oldest son, the one you’re so proud of, into the US Army

to defend the nation in time of war? Would you want advance guarantees about the likely outcome of the campaign, its necessity, the length and number of tours of duty your son would have go through? Where and how deeply does it touch you that “God gave his Son” to rescue the likes of you and me? Does it ever move us to gratitude? To saying “*though I don’t pretend to understand it, I thank you Father for redeeming me through the death of Jesus*”?

God gave his *only Son*. Jesus was the unique likeness of his Father, the only human who apparently ever lived in full obedience to him, and the only one who knew him well enough to call him “Abba,” and to instruct his disciples to use the same name, “Father” when they prayed. The “only Son” taught and showed the world more about God in three years of public life than anyone in the history of the world had managed in millennia – not surprising, as he knew him so well!

Does Jesus reveal God to you and me? Does he make the Father’s love so real that we are warmed by it, want to respond to it, and want to share it with other people? Does it move us that his death somehow atoned for all the ways we turn our backs on the Father; that it somehow created a bridge of reconciliation between us and God; that Jesus the God-man was uniquely able to reconnect us to God? Does all this matter to you, or is it something “other people believe,” something you find unbelievable or even distasteful? But this is Christianity 101!

It’s a hard thing, to be sure, for any of us to accept that reconciling us to God might demand a price. We mostly think we are doing well enough, at least compared to some other people we know, and it offends us to be told that someone had to atone for our sins! But this is close to the heart of the Christian Gospel: that “Christ Jesus came

into the world to save sinners;" or as John puts it, *"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"* (Jn 3:17).

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." It's a large statement, with large consequences, as we shall see next week.

Let us pray...