

Session 1 — Can God Really Love Someone Like Me?

John 3:16–17 — The Heart of the Gospel

Main question: *If God knows everything about me, can He really love and accept me?*

Memory Verse: John 3:16

Main Passage

- John 3:16–17 (NASB95, NIV, KJV)

Parallel Passages

- Genesis 22:1–18
- Numbers 21:4–9
- Isaiah 52:13–53:12
- Romans 5:6–11
- Ephesians 2:1–10
- 1John 4:7–16

Opening question: When you hear the word “God,” what is the very first feeling that comes to mind?

Historical context

Who wrote John?

- The Apostle John, one of Jesus' closest disciples.
- He writes many years after Jesus' resurrection (probably AD 80–90), after the gospels (Greek: “good news”) Matthew, Mark, and Luke had already circulated.
- John tells fewer stories but spends more time explaining **who Jesus is**.

Who was John writing to?

- Both Jews and Gentiles.
- Some readers knew the Old Testament well.
- Others came from pagan backgrounds.
- John explains Jewish customs more often than the other Gospel writers because many readers were unfamiliar with them.

Immediate Context

John 3 records Jesus' nighttime conversation with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus:

- respected Pharisee
- teacher of Israel
- morally upright
- highly educated
- sincerely searching

If someone as religious as Nicodemus needed new birth, everyone does. John 3:16–17 is Jesus' explanation of why God sent His Son.

Read the Passage

Read John 3:16–17 aloud:

- NASB95: ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that He gave His ^[a]only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.
- NIV: ¹⁶ For 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.
- KJV: 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.

- ¹⁷ For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Compare wording. Notice especially:

- loved
- gave
- believes
- eternal life
- perish
- condemned
- saved

Observation

What does the passage actually say?

Notice: God loved. God gave. People believe. People receive life. Jesus saves. The focus is on God's action before ours.

Key Old Testament Background

Understanding John 3 requires knowing several earlier stories.

1. Genesis 22 — Abraham offers Isaac

- God asked Abraham to offer his beloved son.
- At the last moment God provided a ram.
- John echoes this story.
- Abraham did **not** ultimately sacrifice his son.
- God did.

Discussion: Why would John want readers thinking about Isaac?

2. Numbers 21:4–9

Immediately before John 3:16 Jesus says: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness..."

- Israel had rebelled.
- God sent judgment.
- God also provided one means of rescue.
- Those who looked at God's provision lived.
- Likewise, those who look to Messiah in trust receive life.

Discussion: Did looking at the bronze serpent earn healing? Or was it trusting God's promise?

3. Isaiah 53

Isaiah foretold:

- God's Servant
- suffering voluntarily
- bearing sin
- bringing peace
- justifying many

John assumes readers will eventually connect Jesus with Isaiah's suffering servant.

Key words

"Loved"

Greek: ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*)

God acts for the good of another even at great personal cost. Love here is not merely emotion. It is sacrificial action.

"World"

κόσμος (*kosmos*)

John often uses "world" to describe humanity living in rebellion against God. God loved rebels. Not merely good people.

"Gave"

God's love is demonstrated through action. Love is measured by sacrifice. Not sentiment.

"Believe" — more than acknowledge

πιστεύω (*pisteuō*)

While English readers often hear "believe" as "accept certain facts," *pisteuō* regularly carries the sense of **placing confidence in, relying on, trusting, or entrusting oneself to** someone.

- **Mere acknowledgment:** "I believe airplanes exist." That requires no commitment.
- **Biblical trust:** "I trust this airplane enough to board it." That changes behavior.

Jesus is calling for the second kind. Even demons know true facts about God.

James writes: "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder."
(James 2:19, NASB95)

The demons acknowledge who God is, but they do not trust Him or submit to Him.

By contrast, Abraham trusted God's promises, and that trust shaped his actions (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4).

Throughout John's Gospel, *pisteuō* is relational. Believing in Jesus means relying on Him as the One who gives life, not merely agreeing that He existed or performed miracles.

Questions: What is the difference between believing a chair exists and trusting it enough to sit in it? How does that illustration help explain John's use of "believe"?

Parallel passages

Romans 5:6–11

Paul explains: God loved us while we were still sinners. The initiative belongs to God.

Ephesians 2:1–10

People are spiritually dead. God makes them alive. Salvation is a gift. Not earned.

1John 4:9–10

John later summarizes his Gospel: Love begins with God. Not us.

Main truths

- **God begins the rescue.** We seek Him because He first sought us.
 - **God's love is active.** Love moved Him to give His Son.
 - **Jesus came to save.** Judgment is real. But God's first purpose in sending Jesus was rescue.
 - **Eternal life is both present and future.** It is not merely living forever. It is knowing God beginning today (John 17:3).
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Discussion

Understanding

- Why is Nicodemus the perfect person to receive this teaching?
- What surprises you most about John 3:16–17?
- Why does Jesus mention condemnation?
- What does God's love cost Him?

Digging Deeper

- Why is Genesis 22 important background?
- How does the bronze serpent prepare us for Jesus?
- Why did Isaiah describe the Messiah as suffering?

Application

- When have you mistaken God's love for God's approval of everything you do?
- What is one burden of guilt you still carry?
- Is your relationship with Jesus mostly intellectual, emotional, or trusting?
- What would trusting Jesus more look like this week?
- Which fear does John 3:16–17 speak into most: rejection, failure, death, shame, or condemnation?

Prayer focus

- Thank God for loving us before we loved Him.
- Thank Him for giving His Son.
- Ask Him to deepen our trust in Jesus rather than merely increasing our knowledge about Him.
- Pray for friends and family members who have heard about Jesus but have not yet entrusted themselves to Him.

Looking ahead

The next session returns to **John 1:1–5**, where John answers an even more foundational question: **Who is Jesus?**

Before explaining what Jesus came to do, John first reveals who He has always been — the eternal Word through whom all things were made, the source of life and light for a dark world.